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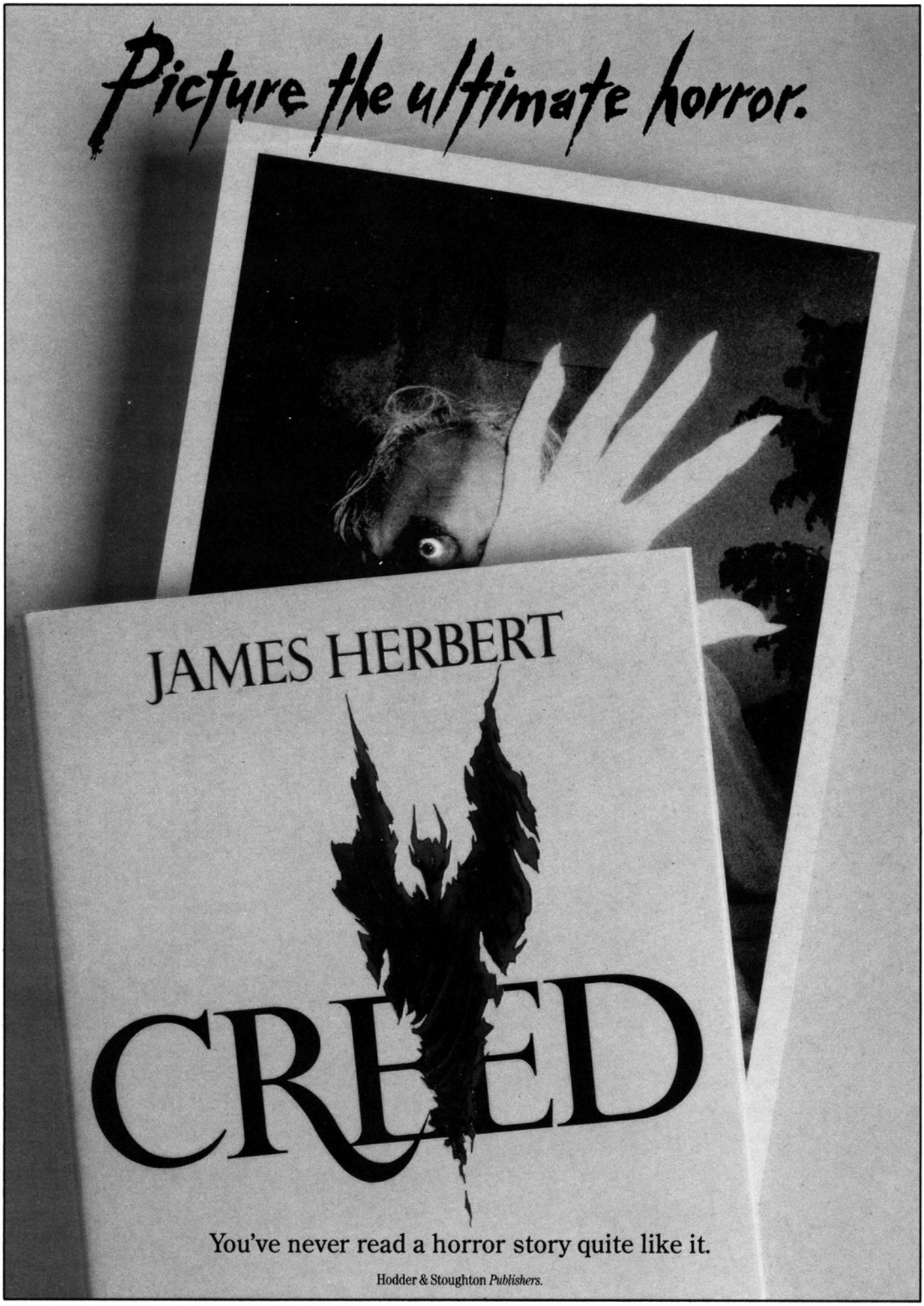
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SUBSCRIPTIONS from Select Subscriptions Ltd, 5 River Park Estate, Billet Lane, Berkhamsted, Herts HP4 1HL. Tel: (0442) 876661.
12 issues UK £23.40, Europe £31.00, Middle East £31.30, Far East £34.20, Rest of World £31.80 (or $56.00 USA).
USA Subscription Agent: Wise Owl Worldwide Publications, 4314 West 238th Street, Torrance, CA 90505 USA.
BACK ISSUES for the last twelve months, subject to availability from: Select Subscriptions Ltd, 5 River Park Estate, Billet Lane, Berkhamsted, Herts HP4 1HL. Tel: (0442) 876661. To avoid disappointment check availability before placing your order. Each copy costs cover price plus 60p p&p.
BINDERS: £6.80 each (including p&p). Telephone your Access or Barclaycard order through on (0442) 66551.
DISTRIBUTION UK NEWSTRADE: SM Distribution Ltd, 6 Leigham Court Road, Streatham, London SW16 2PG. Tel: 081-677 8111, Telex: 261643.
OVERSEAS SALES, UK SPECIALIST RETAIL SALES AND ALL MAGAZINE AVAILABILITY ENQUIRIES: Copy Sales Co-Ordinator, Argus Specialist Publications — see address below — Tel: (0442) 66551.
PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY: Garnet Print, Rotherham.
ORIGINATION BY: Project 3, Whitstable.

SKELETON CREW

Argus Specialist Publications, Argus House Boundary Way, Hemel Hempstead, Herts. HP2 7ST. Tel: (0442) 66551

ISSN No. 0959-8006

AN Argus SPECIALIST PUBLICATION

DEADITORIAL

Funny old place, the world. Just when you think the scariest thing around is the belief of many people that the latest Troma video release represents real horror cinema, along comes acid rain, random slayings and Saddam Hussein. How is a horror editor to cope with it all, asks Dave Reeder.

It's strange, sitting here. After all, how many editors of horror mags do you know? There's certainly less than a dozen of us, worldwide, delivering to your newstand every month a carefully compiled collection of the bizarre, the obscure and the plain scary.

But that's okay. I can cope with being one of a dozen. After all, I love this genre and it's just great when a hobby and a job coincide.

No, what's strange is the world out there. I mean, now we have increasing numbers of maniacs roaming the cities and countryside, searching for just another body to kill, to mutilate, to destroy. Whether that's joggers in New York whose lives are wrecked by 'wilding' packs of teenagers out to rape or worse, or pregnant women who wait by emergency phones on a motorway for a Relay service the colour of blood, or increasingly alienated commuters on the London Underground who may at any moment become the next victim of the young man who pushes people under trains. And then walks away. Laughing to himself.

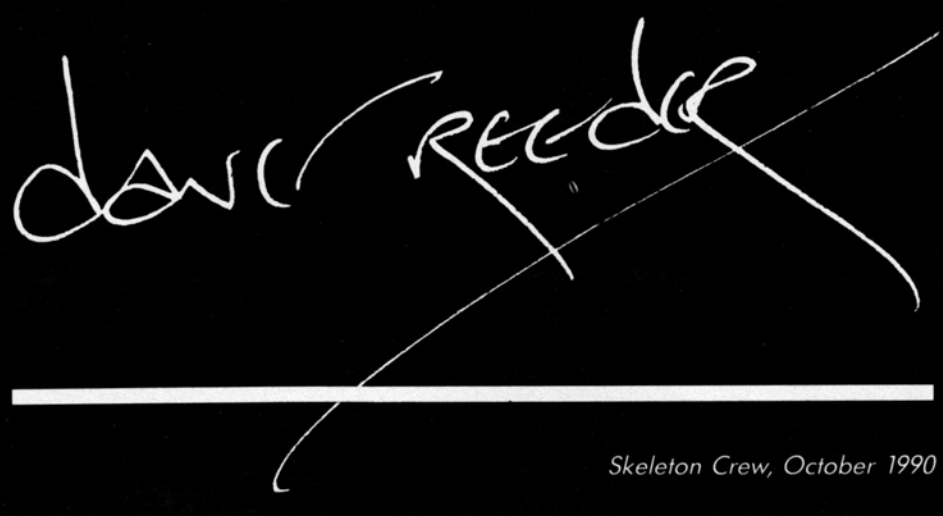
Yes, it's an old cliche, but the real world is suddenly scarier than any novel or short story. For instance?

For instance, at the moment I write this, I'm waiting to see what Saddam Hussein's next move on the chessboard of Middle Eastern politics will be. All the time trying desperately to expunge from my mind the piece I saw in the paper today, reminding me of Nostradamus' prophecy. You know the one. How, in the 1990s, a tyrant shall rise in the Middle East and, through his actions, will start a war that will destroy the world.

So how, as a writer, do you top that?

Possibly by a descent into the maelstrom and all that. In so many ways, Edgar Allan Poe led the way. Our response to the madness and the horror of the world must be to reinterpret the world through the poetry and sublimeness of our visions. Say what?

The way forward is certain. True horror literature will, as true horror literature always has done, interpret the world, building layers greater than plot by the imposition of style and artifice and sheer talent. Enter Poe. Enter Lovecraft. Enter Campbell. Enter the whole glorious tapestry of genius, weaving our dreams into brighter tomorrows. Yet again.



Yes, it's an old cliche, but the real world is suddenly scarier than any novel or short story.

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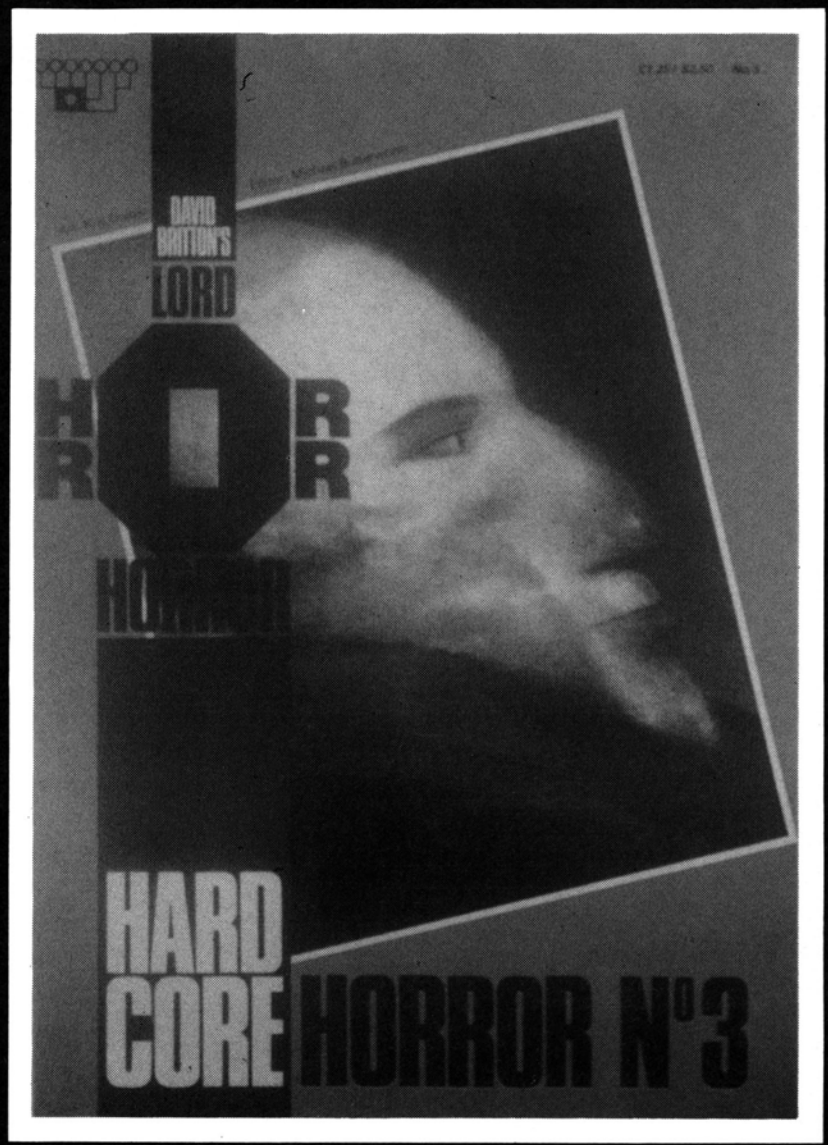

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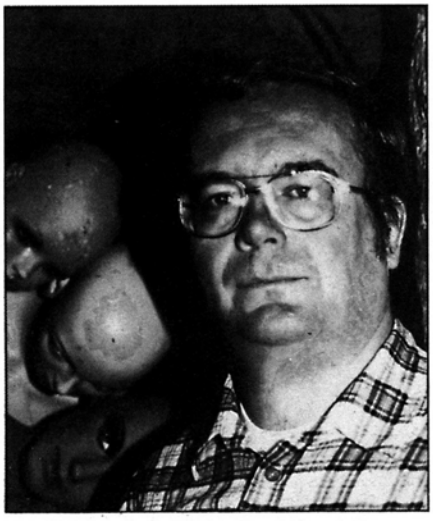


THE LUGGAGE IN THE CRYPT

You *can* take it with you. Well, so the Ancient Egyptians believed. 'It' of course was everything. Clothes, food, jewelry, furniture and if you were a member of the royal family: thrones, chariots, slaves. It was assumed that you needed in death, what you needed in life. What then did you chose? Which food, which favourite chariot etc? What items mean so much to you in this world, you'd just have to have them in the next? Nicholas Vince poses the questions to Ramsey Campbell.

NV: For this interview we're assuming the Egyptian view of the afterlife. But what is *your* view?

RC: Well, would you believe it's actually what I figured out for THE INFLUENCE. I mean that's the one the that makes most sense to me, in so far as I had to write a ghost *novel*. With a ghost *story*, you know, I don't mind taking the supernatural or the ghostly, the spectral on trust. But I think for a novel, you've got to work out some kind of scheme into which the narrative will fit and so it is that idea; that the moment of death, will be the last dream that never ends.

In which case, I mean, it's going to be — one of my several recurring dreams — almost certainly the one about going into 'unfamiliar second hand book shop', after 'unfamiliar second hand book shop' except that they are in some strange way slightly familiar, and I've been there before. And there are always books on the shelves that I want, books that I never knew existed, but I wanted to exist. And I don't seem to have the money for them, but it doesn't seem to matter, because I'm just going to be able to carry on and stay in this bookshop for almost as long as it takes. I never remember leaving the shop, which is interesting because I always remember going in. It seems to me that the afterlife is going to be precisely that.

NV: Moving on then to your Luggage in the Crypt, what's your first choice for a painting?

RC: The first one is by (Camille) Pisarro (1830-1903); CRYSTAL PALACE, LONDON; it's in the private collection of E. Bensinger in Chicago. Whenever I look at this — I mean this is a great Impressionist painting and it's wonderful — and then after looking at it for about thirty seconds the whole thing comes literally alive in front of me. It's that ghostly effect, which for me, most of the best paintings have. I think it an amazing piece of photo-realism, without going through the motions of being a photo-realistic painting.

NV: And the second?

RC: Now we get to the Van Gogh. This is a late Van Gogh, (July 1889) the UNDERGROWTH WITH IVY. (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). It was actually done in the hospital gardens in Saint Remy, after he'd mutilated himself. And in a sense, for me at least, this is one of the more terrifying areas of Van Gogh's life, and I think there are several of them.

Run your eyes around that for a while and the more that begins to vibrate and come alive. Now, I'd never known this, but there is this terrifying thought, which I do find genuinely terrifying at the back of my mind, that this is actually what he was seeing and he was really just trying to paint it realistically, rather than use all this technique in order to create a painting. Imagine seeing that all the time, rather than just some of the time.

NV: That's not a thing I had thought of before, and you're right it is terrifying. It is beautiful, I was brought up near St Leonard's Forest and this is really "good forest", it really captures the feeling of the dark forest.

RC: "The dark forest", there you have it. Ah, now that's obviously one other reason why I like the painting. Old 'Ted Klein'; he of THE CEREMONIES, the Machenish novel: I remember he said the reason why he write the THE CEREMONIES, was because there were certain phrases like "the dark woods", which had a certain resonance for him, and obviously for me too, and many of us. So that is one more reason to choose this painting.

Number three is the nearest we get to 'kitsch', I think. I like kitsch, there's nothing wrong with kitsch.

NV: Kenny Everett once said that he would like a room in his house, entirely for kitsch.

RC: That's probably the way to do it. Well, this is a guy called Samuel Coleman, A

ROMANTIC LANDSCAPE (Bristol City Art Gallery) and you can't get more kitsch than that.

It has a 'vistas beyond the horizon' quality that appeals to me quite a bit. It inhabits the areas of Victorian fairy tale, which is something I grew up with.

NV: Again, it's a very interesting play of light.

RC: Yes, indeed I think all of three are about light to some extent, which is something that preoccupies me in painting.

NV: You've chosen from and shown me the paintings in books. Where did you first come across the paintings?

RC: I didn't know them till I got the books — this wonderful Five Elm series which now appears to be defunct — because they did them bigger than anyone else really. The quality of the reproduction and actually the size is part of the appeal. I started on those nearly twenty years ago. The first one I ever bought was the FANTASY one, you can imagine why.

NV: And as we are talking of books let's move onto your choice of books.

RC: Ah, the 'difficult questions'. Though actually the first was absolutely straight forward, because its a book I've loved ever since I first got it, and that's THE GORMENGHAST TRILOGY by Mervyn Peake. The reason is a simple one. There is huge breadth of imagination and also the comic genius of it, as much as the fantastic genius. But also it's the book that I read, read, read in awe, thinking "Christ I'm never going to be one hundredth as good as this". It's clearly a question on inimitability, clearly nobody can touch Peake, actually very few people try. Although it's fair to say that M John Harrison is in that tradition and a very worthy successor. But even so GORMENGHAST is like nothing else on Earth. Which is part of it's charm and again, in a sense, it is very much like many things on Earth. There's this quality of mirroring, of throwing this strange light on all sorts of areas of experience which you know were not quite like that before, which has always greatly appealed to me.

NV: When did you first come across it?

RC: In the national book sale. I got two first editions of the first and third volumes, for I think it was two and six each, back in the late sixties. That was how low Peake's star had sunk. Then I managed to get a rather tatty copy of the central book and then I read and re-read. I must have read them three or four times now and I constantly recommend them to folks who I think should know about these things, which are many people, and I've never had anyone come back to me and say; "Why did you do this to me?" Though there is a certain animosity against him. The high fantasy guys seem to find him disturbing because of his violence and sense of the macabre.

NV: What about number two?

RC: The second one I came to is UNDER THE VOLCANO (by Malcolm Lowry), because in a strange way it relates back to what we were talking about earlier: the afterlife, or the moment of death anyway. It's one of the great novels about the last day in the protagonist's life. I think that's a book to re-read because it really doesn't yield up all its qualities on the first shot. Again this is something that I came across first, I would have thought, in my early twenties. I was probably too young to appreciate it, well I'm sure I was too young to appreciate it fully, but I got something from it. And it hung around and I went back to it several years later and found the second time round it did a lot more. And I think, if I may, I'd like here to make a special plea: I'd like to take as an appendix, even though it's a separate volume, a volume of Lowry's letters. It includes a letter to one of his editors, which is an enormously long letter, analysing in tremendous detail what he was trying to do in this book. Because the editors were saying; "Well, look this opening chapter is deadly dull and the readers are going to throw this book away, you've got to cut half this out." And he wrote this tremendous letter, saying precisely why everything was in it. I suppose the astonishing thing is — it was extremely moving — to read a writer with that intensity of dedication to what he was doing. But also it's the sort of letter, that every writer — no I won't say "every writer", this writer for sure — wishes he could write. Or the review you wish you'd get sometimes, where *every* word has been weighed, and everything that you wanted to be there and were trying to do has communicated itself — simply you write it yourself under a pseudonym, you do your own review and Lowry's probably the nearest I've seen any writer come, in that regards. I'll just rip out those twenty pages from the 'Letters' and stick them into UNDER THE VOLCANO, as an appendix in my personal afterlife copy.

NV: That sounds fair enough, I think we'll allow that one.

RC: Alright, and the third one I think partly, this is a slightly odd choice, well not an odd choice, I mean slightly *odd* in the sense I'm actually justifying it to myself,

"If I said, I weep at the end of LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN, that leaves nothing to describe what happens to me in the last twenty minutes of TRISTAN."

"Pulls out the bottom drawer and the hand of a child comes reaching out from amongst the linen. These are the sort of things that stay with you when you are eight years old. I remember thinking, "Oh Christ," for night afterwards."

because at least I'm going to have time to read. It's something I've read a couple of times and again it's something that's changed, to its considerable benefit — no I won't, hang on, I was going to say the ALEXANDRIA QUARTET (by Lawrence Durrell) but I don't think I am, because I'll tell you why I'm not. You can allow me that or one other thing, I'll let you decide.

NV: Sure.

RC: Because one thing I'd really like to take with me, is a definitive anthology of supernatural horror fiction. And the more I thought about it, the more I thought, well it doesn't quite exist. I mean there are numerous books which have like two thirds of what I'd want to be in there, but obviously I'm not going to try and slip in several volumes, because that's not on for this game. So, I'm almost inclined to say, if I'm allowed to edit my own volume to take with me, maybe that would be the thing.

NV: O.K.

RC: In which case . . . You see I'd have to have a volume which would include several stories by (Sheridan) Le Fanu, and several stories by M.R. James, certainly THE TREASURE OF ABBOT THOMAS, and certainly CASTING THE RUNES, and certainly because it was the first one that scared me profoundly, THE RESIDENCY AT WHITMINSTER. But I'd also want (Algernon) Blackwood's THE WILLOWS in there and I'd also want (Arthur) Machen's THE WHITE PEOPLE and I'd also want (H.P.) Lovecraft's COLOUR OUT OF SPACE and I could go on. You see there are books that contain two thirds of these but not all of them. There is a very good collection by Jack Sullivan called LOST SOULS, but that is specifically *English* Ghost Story, so I couldn't have the Lovecraft in there. There is a very good anthology by David Hartwell, huge thing like you used to get in the thirties, has a thousand or maybe eleven thousand pages, really fat. Its called THE DARK DESCENT, Tor books do it as a hard cover. And that has got a lot of the things I would like, that's got THE WILLOWS and THE RATS IN THE WALLS by Lovecraft, but it doesn't have any Machen for some reason, now don't ask me why. I'm in there, Clive's (Barker) in there, but Machen isn't. So this is why I'm going to say, "I'm going to make up my own book and take it with me." I don't know what its going to be called, . . . Yes I do: THE TRADITION OF TERROR.

NV: I'm curious: did you come to horror stories when you were young? Can you remember the first collections you read?

RC: I certainly sort of remember, I mean I remember; I'm sure I could have been no more than seven or eight years old, when I got a book out of the library on my mother's ticket called, FIFTY YEARS OF GHOST STORIES. And this stayed in my mind precisely because of that M.R. James story, THE RESIDENCY AT WHITMINSTER. I couldn't remember who had written it, and I couldn't remember anything about it except for one image, or rather two images. I think they're actually consecutive in the story. I mean this is late James when it is getting more surreal, it seems to me. And in a sense you've got the succession of dislocations of the Normal. And so you've got a scene in which somebody goes into a darkened room and feels the feelers of an enormous insect, at least as tall as himself, passing over his face and this is immediately followed by, or preceded by, I can't remember which way round; a scene in which another of the characters goes into a room with a linen chest in it, in a state of panic, which she doesn't understand, she pulls out one drawer and lots of linen, she pulls out the second drawer, same thing. Pulls out the bottom drawer and the hand of a child comes reaching out from amongst the linen. These are the sort of things that stay with you when you are eight years old. I remember thinking, "Oh Christ," for nights afterwards. It actually stayed with me for a long time, until I re-read the book a couple of years later and to some extent exorcised it, because at least then I had a context for it. I think that was pretty well my earliest experience.

Although we could say it goes back earlier; to reading people like George McDonald, because there are moments of terror in things like THE PRINCESS AND THE GOBLIN, which are at least equally direct for me. Partly because they suggest more than they describe, and then describe enough to suggest far worse. So this always worked for me. I mean even before I got onto adult stories, but I think the point is that there was hardly a step from the stuff which was nominally for children, and the stuff which was nominally for adults, and so it was a natural progression for me. So certainly I was mid-primary school when I was reading a lot of the classics and certainly by the time I'd gone to secondary school, I had a thorough grounding in James and Le Fanu and (Edgar Allan) Poe. Lovecraft came later because he was very difficult to come by in the late fifties.

NV: Those are the books, what about the films or videos?

RC: I think these were relatively easy. If we say videos, are you allowing stuff we

have compiled ourselves?

NV: Yes.

RC: In that case, no problem at all. The first one then, is about six or seven LAUREL AND HARDY two reelers on a three hour tape, including HELPMATES, and including WRONG AGAIN, and including PERFECT DAY, and LAUGHING GRAVY and THE MUSIC BOX obviously. Do I need to justify myself? I certainly hope not. I mean I just watch one every so often. Twenty minutes of Laurel and Hardy is worth two hours of pretty much anyone else, for *my* taste in comedy. That's certainly not to underrate other guys, but in the best of the two reels, they pack in more than anyone, either before or since. The more I watch it, the more the timing seems astonishing, particularly with the long takes, which they often are.

That's a definite first, the second one, well we already know we have an unregenerate romantic here, after we had the Samuel Coleman, so LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN, directed by Max Ophuls (1948). A recreation of Vienna in Hollywood. It is *the* great romantic, tragic movie. I shed tears at the end whenever I run it, which is pretty often. It's just an amazing film in terms of sheer style and panache and *wit* actually. There is in fact a fair level of irony underpinning the whole thing, but not to any lack of feeling to put it mildly. It's Louis Jourdan and Joan Fontaine, it was the best the thing that Fontaine ever did by a long chalk, and probably Jourdan actually. I wouldn't try and describe it as it works best as a film.

And the third one, the one that immediately sprung to mind, probably immediately after the Laurel and Hardy is CITIZEN KANE (directed by and starring Orson Welles 1941). And now I'm going to say I'm not going to have CITIZEN KANE, even though I think it's the greater film, I'm actually going to have TOUCH OF EVIL (1952), which is a much later Welles film, it's twenty years later in fact. And to me what I love about that film, even though I'm sure KANE is the much better film, and TOUCH OF EVIL is such a work of genius, for my taste. Yet, here is Welles making it for, to put it mildly, an uneven producer Albert Zugsmith. And making it not on the highest budget you ever saw, and making it I think in a fairly tight shooting schedule. And yet within that he could bring off this astonishing film, which is like the work of nobody else. It stands up against anything else that was made in the '50s and probably anything that was made since not least in terms of sheer brilliance. Have you seen that?

NV: Yes, there's a sequence I remember; of the bomb on the car.

RC: It's 'the bomb on the car' movie. That's right.

NV: And of course, it's Welles himself, playing the evil sheriff.

RC: You say "evil sheriff", and yet there is this sense of huge moral ambiguity, it's almost . . . let us say a Falstaffian figure, of course he went on to play Falstaff, but there is a sense in which this terribly corrupt figure is yet more attractive, than the Charlton Heston guy who is clearly the moral centre of the film in one sense, because he is the guy, who if we *are* going to be moral about it, who's side we should be on, but there is something about the Welles' character, for all we realise how corrupt and dangerous he is, there is *something* there. It's not merely the largeness of the role, though it's typical of Welles that he parodies himself, by immediately having this low angle shot of his own belly, in the shot in which the character is introduced.

But what amazes me as much as anything about TOUCH OF EVIL is: it begins with the bomb being put on the car and then you have a *half mile* tracking shot, which follows the car to some extent and actually picks up most of the characters within the film on the way, and then eventually picks up the car again and goes all the way with it. And partly because we need to know real time is passing, because we know exactly how long that bomb has got to go off. And what is doubly amazing about that, in a way is that it is like the worse packaging you ever saw on a paperback, because *they actually run the credits* over this amazing shot. You've actually got this shot going on behind it, as if the credits are trying to obscure this work of genius. Yet they can't, obviously, the more you see the film, the more amazing that moment becomes. But there are scenes of equal astonishment throughout the film, so in a sense, one of the reasons I would have that film, is precisely this sense that despite all the depredations of his career and all the things he had to put up with, and all the things he never finished, Welles was still capable, twenty years later and at what proved to be the end of his career, of making this film, so there's hope for us all.

NV: O.K., what music would you take with you?

RC: Well, two immediate choices and one I wrangled around a bit for. The first one without any question, my one all time favourite piece of music, for a variety of reasons, is Beethoven's last quartet, the Opus 145 quartet. Partly, I suppose

"It has a 'vistas beyond the horizon' quality that appeals to me quite a bit. It inhabits the areas of Victorian fairy tale, which is something I grew up with."

"There's this quality of mirroring, of throwing this strange light on all sorts of areas of experience which you know were not quite like that before, which has always greatly appealed to me."

because I once played it at one of the real rock bottom times of my life, and it actually brought me right back up again. What more can I say for it? Clearly a great deal more. It's fatuous to say that it's a summation of Beethoven's work, because obviously it is nothing of the sort, but it's the last great work, in which he's reached in some ways such great simplicity in some movements, in others he's reached what *sounds* like completely unselfconcious, extraordinary complexity. I mean in the first movement the whole thing changes about every couple of bars, and it's so astonishing its impossible to keep up with it. First time round or indeed ever. Every time I play it, I think, 'Well, now I'm going to get it, but I never do quite because, so much is happening, there are so many changes, so many kinds, it hangs there and is. I can follow it, but you can never quite capture it having heard it again. That's one you never whistle along with. I'd choose the version by the Amadeus Quartet.

The second would certainly be TRISTAN AND ISOLDE, (Richard Wagner) purely because for me it's *the great* Opera. I mean simple as that, it's where all Opera goes. There's a sense . . . I mean it's an idiotic statement for me to make, because clearly after that Opera does all manner of other things, but it is one of the great, quintessential, inimitable flowerings of Opera. If I said, I weep at the end of LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN, that leaves nothing to describe what happens to me in the last twenty minutes of TRISTAN. I think I'd like the Bernstein version, as he seems to go back to the manuscript and take the tempi. People say, "You're not going to have that huge silence *there* are you?" And he does, which works extremely well.

And the third work, I didn't have that much of a problem, because more and more, the more I listen to his music, the more I find that my absolute favourite composer is Rossini. And for a long time I was going to say the BARBER OF SEVILLE, because I love that. A really good reflection of that is because it's as funny as any opera I know. And I finally decided I was going to have CINDERELLA. The one I've got has Abado conducting it. Partly because that's also very funny, but it has the most beautiful piece of music he ever wrote. This is the sextet towards the end. I also love his serious operas, I mean WILLIAM TELL is amazing and TANCREDI is astonishing. And for *bel canto,* personally I'll take Rossini over Bellini any time. I think CINDERELLA is the closest he came to doing both the comedy in a single opera.

NV: If I throw out to you: any modern composer or popular songs, are there any of those you listen to? For instance do you listen to any Cole Porter?

RC: Yes I do, I listen to a lot of Cole Porter, but if we are to go for any modern or popular, then it would have to be Billie Holiday: 60 minutes on the Verve label.

NV: O.K. An item of furniture?

RC: A bed. My bed. One, because it's where Jenny and I are together, it's also where I'm closest to death, when you think about it. I go there every day. It seems that somebody said this better than me, about the "little death". It's true, when you go to sleep, that's when you are closest to it.

NV: Favourite food.

RC: This sounds like special pleading, but it's not. I'm going to take some of Jenny's Indian cuisine, because she does the best Indian food I've ever tasted. I mean years back, when we were living in Liverpool originally and when we got married first, we couldn't find an Indian restaurant we really like, so Jenny learned how to cook it from an Indian lady who did a cookery course. I'd just as soon eat at home as go out to any Indian restaurant. So the favourite dishes would be — *Sag maas,* which is spinach wrapped around meat, *Aloo tiki,* a potato dish and *Seekh kebab,* minced lamb unleavened bread.

NV: What costume would you wear?

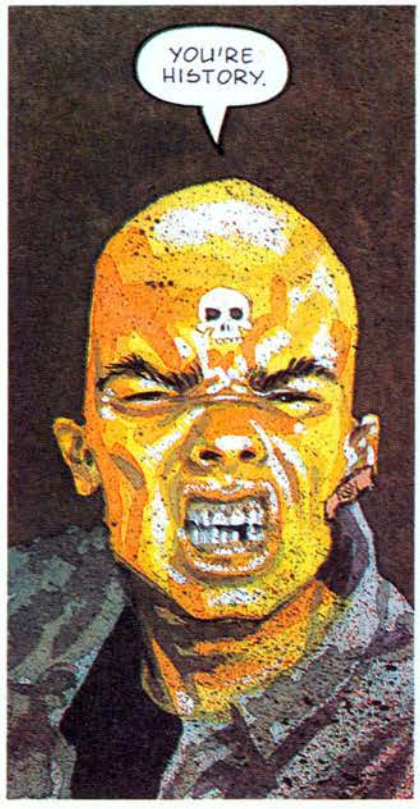
RC: If you can't be naked when you're dead, when can you?

NV: Any photographs?

RC: Just one photograph of the rest of the family. Basically what it was when we went to Crete and we found this archaeological settlement of around the Fifth Century. The appeal to some extent is that you've got to walk for half an hour off any road to get there. The photograph shows that we got to the top of this and shows Mat and Tam and Jenny, standing on the edge of this mountainous landscape.

NV: What is your apologia, your reason, for being allowed into the next life?

RC: I suppose that I tried to push my talent to the limit and as a writer I took responsibility for my characters because they are all part of me. And through them, I tried to understand what it is to be human and also to see beyond that.



For 25 years, Stan Nicholls has surveyed the UK comics scene as publisher, editor, comic shop manager and enthusiast. In the first of a semi-regular series, he looks at the cutting edge of commercial comics — Crisis.

"One of the biggest-selling comics in the world is called *Girri-Girri*, which is published in Turkey and serves as the main opposition paper," says Igor Goldkind.

"It is produced by a man who was a political prisoner. It is written and illustrated by prisoners and has a circulation of millions. The proceeds are used to buy and smuggle in ink and paper to these prisoners. The reason it gets around, and the reason the publisher hasn't been arrested again, is because nobody cares. It's only a *comic*."

Goldkind is a consultant and publicist for Fleetway's *Crisis*, pre-eminent among 'new wave' comics. A stablemate of market-leader *2000AD*, it launched with sales of 100,000, now settled to between 40 and 50,000 per fortnightly issue.

It was born of editors Pat Mills and Steve MacManus' conviction that there was an older audience than the traditional eight to twelve year-olds. They were asked to prove it by developing a title for the upper-end of the *2000AD* readership. "It was decided the slant would be stories dealing with real issues affecting people now," Goldkind explains.

Crisis has run a strip about race relations in Brixton, and the story of two teenagers growing up in Belfast, *Troubled Souls*, *The New Statesmen* featured a gay superhero, while *Third World War* depicts Western exploitation of developing countries.

MacManus joined IPC as a sub-editor in 1974. He worked on *Valiant*, *Battle Picture Weekly* and *Starlord* before assuming the editorship of *2000AD*, the 57th largest-selling consumer magazine in Britain. He is Managing Editor of the 2000AD Comics Group, a sub-division of Fleetway.

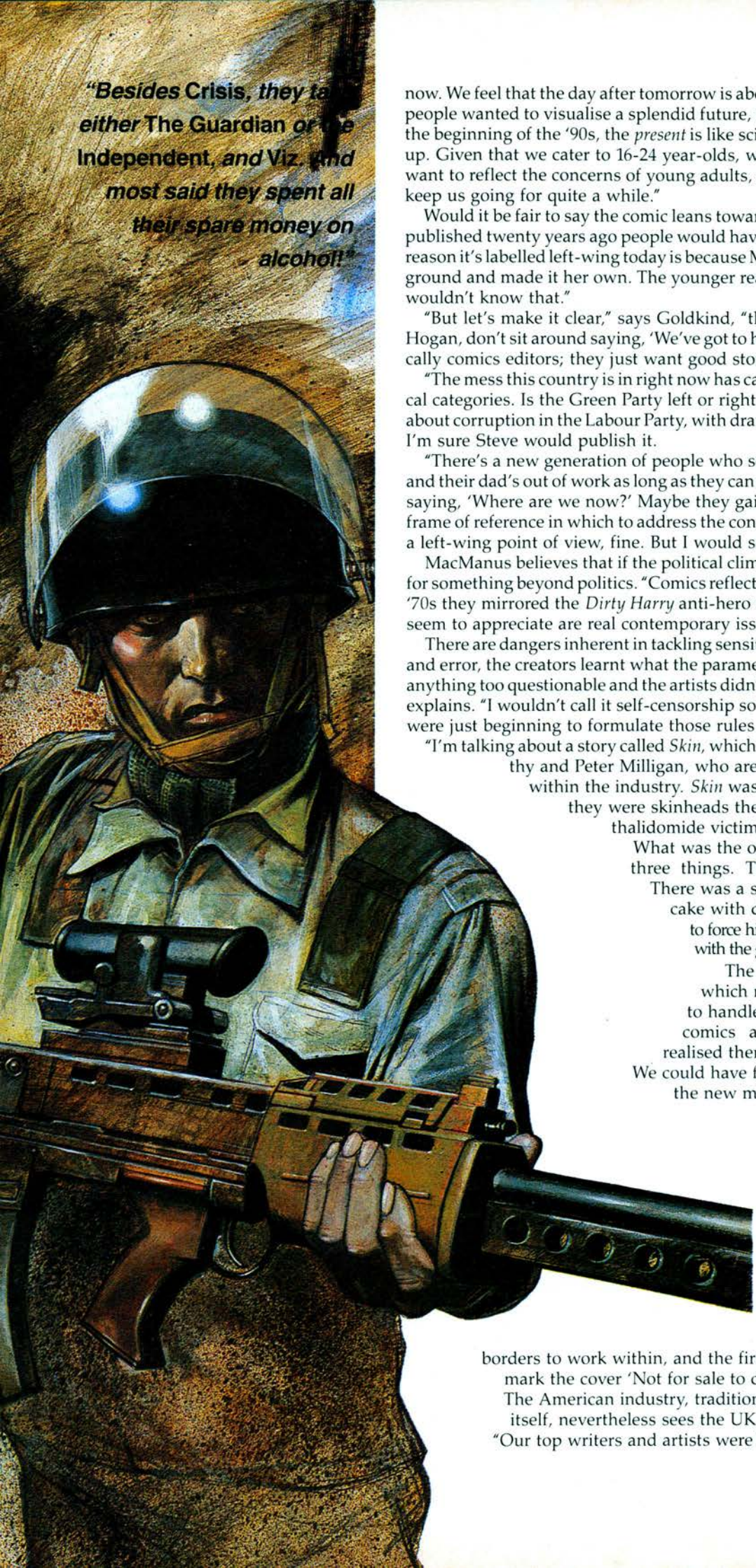
"*2000AD* is twelve years old now, and sells 110,000 copies a week," he says. "Its readership grew up with the comic, and a large percentage of them are in their teens to mid-20s. We got letters saying, 'I still like *2000AD*, and probably won't stop reading it, but I wouldn't mind a title dealing with more adult themes.' So the decision was taken to bring out a kind of older version, which is basically how *Crisis* was conceived.

"But I think it developed not only its own identity, but also opened up a totally different market to *2000AD*. *Crisis*, after beginning with a story set in the far future, now concentrates on contemporary issues. So the older *2000AD* is still to be published."

A survey was undertaken to define the readership. "We received 6000 replies, which is incredible, and underlined the loyalty of the audience. To break it down mathematically, 70% of our readers also read *2000AD*; I think the remaining 30% are the new adult market. The age range is 16-24, primarily, and 90% male, which is something we would like to see balanced better. "Besides *Crisis*, they take either *The Guardian* or the *Independent*, and *Viz*. And most said they spent all their spare money on alcohol!"

Crisis covers controversial topics which until just a few years ago would have rarely appeared in a mainstream comic. "*2000AD* has always had social comment," MacManus contends, "but it had to be snuck in through the back door, disguised as a *Judge Dredd*, *Rogue Trooper* or *Strontium Dog* story. What *Crisis* has done is felt secure enough about the maturity of its readership to be more overt about the social content.

"*Third World War*, our most popular continuous strip, is set nine years from



now. We feel that the day after tomorrow is about as far as you need to go. In the '50s, people wanted to visualise a splendid future, through strips like *Dan Dare*. Today, at the beginning of the '90s, the *present* is like science fiction; you don't need to make it up. Given that we cater to 16-24 year-olds, we're really into what affects them. We want to reflect the concerns of young adults, and there's plenty of material there to keep us going for quite a while."

Would it be fair to say the comic leans toward the left, politically? "Had *Crisis* been published twenty years ago people would have said it was vaguely left of centre. The reason it's labelled left-wing today is because Margaret Thatcher has seized the centre ground and made it her own. The younger readers, who weren't around in the '60s, wouldn't know that."

"But let's make it clear," says Goldkind, "that Steve and his deputy editor, Peter Hogan, don't sit around saying, 'We've got to have a left-wing agenda.' They are basically comics editors; they just want good stories that appeal to their readers.

"The mess this country is in right now has caused people to maybe cast aside political categories. Is the Green Party left or right wing? If somebody submitted a story about corruption in the Labour Party, with dramatic content and good characteristics, I'm sure Steve would publish it.

"There's a new generation of people who see their older brothers don't have jobs and their dad's out of work as long as they can remember; they're looking around and saying, 'Where are we now?' Maybe they gain some perspectives through *Crisis*, a frame of reference in which to address the condition they find themselves in. If that's a left-wing point of view, fine. But I would say it was just humanity."

MacManus believes that if the political climate changes, *Crisis* will still be looking for something beyond politics. "Comics reflect the period they are published in. In the '70s they mirrored the *Dirty Harry* anti-hero syndrome. Now we find what readers seem to appreciate are real contemporary issues."

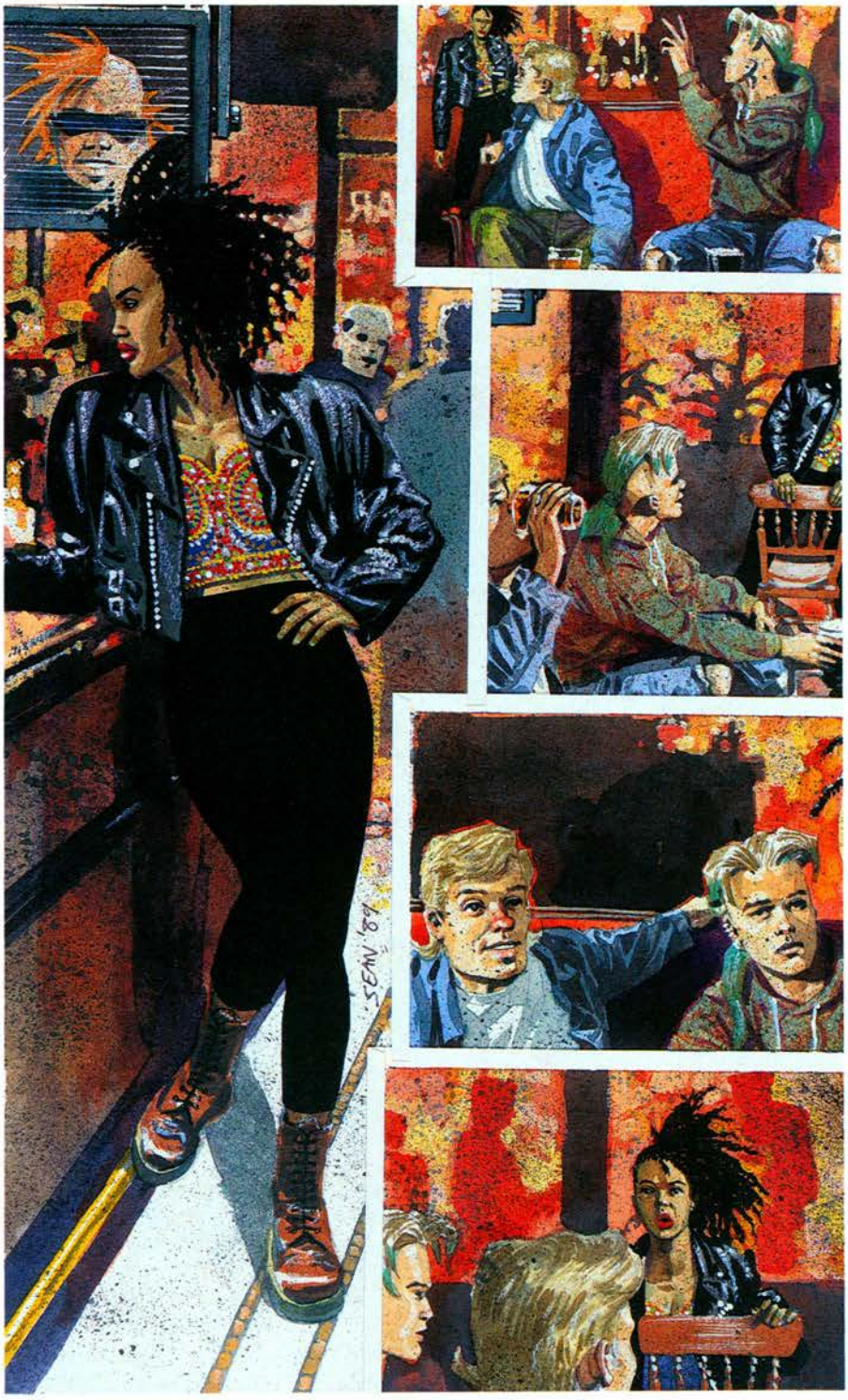
There are dangers inherent in tackling sensitive subjects. On *2000AD*, through trial and error, the creators learnt what the parameters were. "The writers didn't produce anything too questionable and the artists didn't do anything too graphic," MacManus explains. "I wouldn't call it self-censorship so much as common sense. On *Crisis* we were just beginning to formulate those rules when we found there was a limit.

"I'm talking about a story called *Skin*, which I commissioned from Brendan McCarthy and Peter Milligan, who are both very well-known and respected within the industry. *Skin* was a remembrance of their youth, when they were skinheads themselves, and one of their gang was a thalidomide victim. Basically it's portrayal of that."

What was the objection? "In the end it came down to three things. There was the thalidomide character. There was a scene where the protagonist was fed a cake with dope in it, and another where he tried to force himself on a young woman who ran around with the gang."

The problem arose when the repro house which makes the film for the printer refused to handle the strip. "Obviously they still think comics are for children, and they haven't realised there's been a shift toward adult themes. We could have found a repro house that understands the new market, but unfortunately these people called in their lawyers for a legal opinion. The moment that happened, Fleetway was obliged to get its own legal advice, and we were told there was a risk of being prosecuted. The verdict was 'Liable to corrupt and deprave'. So that was the limit, for this company at least. If nothing else, it showed we now have some borders to work within, and the first thing we did, from issue 31, was to mark the cover 'Not for sale to children'."

The American industry, traditionally resistant to controversial themes itself, nevertheless sees the UK as a pool to be fished for new talent. "Our top writers and artists were being tempted away to the American



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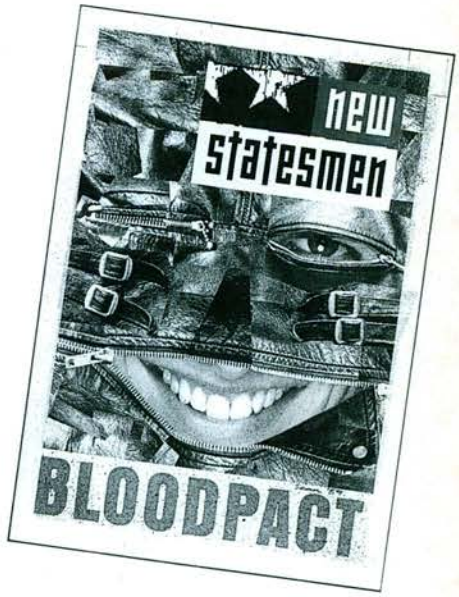
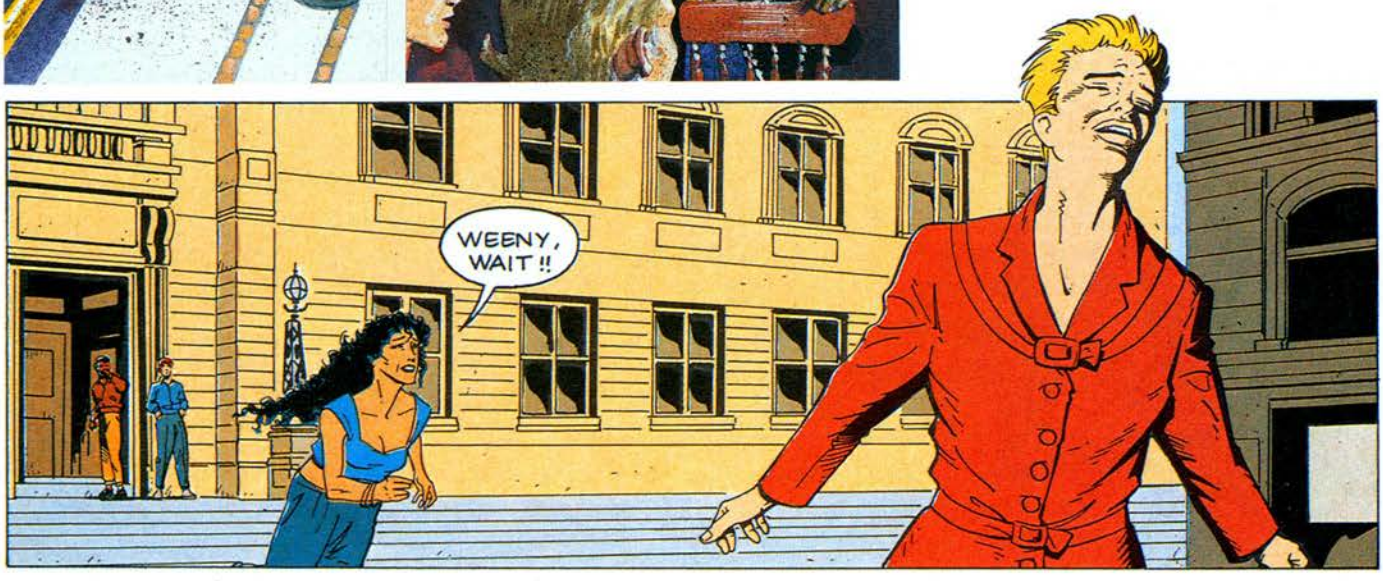


"A lot said, 'I don't read newspapers any more, because they're all Murdoch or Maxwell, and I've given up on television news. But I read Crisis *because I believe what it says.'"*



companies," MacManus admits. "It was clear British talent was the flavour of the month, just as punk had been."

Goldkind agrees: "The whole dichotomy between the two markets is that the top people working in America now are British. The Americans want that kind of slant on things; which is not to say they want British subject matter, but the kind of writing and artistic abilities the British have.

"The Americans have always seen *2000AD* and other British titles as innovatory. DC looked at Alan Moore's *Halo Jones* strip before they gave him *Swamp Thing* to write. Our comics are regarded as a precursor of what's going on."

Steve MacManus' attitude toward this was mixed. "I was pleased for the creators, because I wish them the best deal, but in terms of working for this company there were times when I got really pissed-off about it. The problem was that we were hampered by an antiquated All-Rights policy.

"As long as I've been in Fleetway, what has happened is that a writer or artist signed away the rights to any subsequent use of their work. When you wrote a strip you were paid a flat fee for it. If it was later sold to an overseas market, or a toy was made of it, you didn't receive any more. Also the artwork was retained by the company. This used to be the case in America as well, but in recent years they have led the way in making the system fairer. First by returning artwork, then by creating contracts which allow for the contributor to share in re-use of their material."

Bowing to pressure for change, Fleetway instigated a new contract which goes some way toward vesting the copyright of the material with its creators.

MacManus explains its implications: "Following our change of management — we were bought-out by Maxwell Leisure Magazines a few years ago — we were able to start removing he iniquities. If you write a story for us now, and it is further exploited, you share a percentage of the money involved. That's the first stage toward establishing creator copyright. Stage two involves giving the writers and artists a royalty from the cover price of every copy sold, although it's harder in this country because cover prices are low. A percentage of £1 isn't that much, whereas in America a slice of $4 is quite tasty. However, with this growing adult market, I can see comic prices getting higher."

Crisis claims one of the liveliest letters pages in the business. "We get a terrific amount of mail," says MacManus. "Having worked on *2000AD* for eight years, it's nice to receive letters that don't begin. 'What is under Judge Dredd's helmet?' or 'Why are you wearing a bicycle reflector on your forehead, Tharg?'"

Goldkind thinks the page sometimes resembles a cross between a political forum and a moan session. "In the first year the letters were just incredible," he remembers, "from passionately condemning, to 'You changed my life' type of letters. And from a cross-section of people you wouldn't normally think of as comic readers. A lot said, 'I don't read newspapers any more, because they're all Murdoch or Maxwell, and I've given up on television news. But I read *Crisis* because I believe what it says.'"

As to the future, the plan is to expand the page count from 32 to 48, and there is a possibility of going monthly. In terms of content, we can expect to see adaptations from other mediums — Harry Harrison's *Stainless Steel Rat* series worked well in *2000AD* — and *The Rocky Horror Show* has been suggested.

"I can see this happening more as the market expands." MacManus predicts. "The aim is to enlarge the adult side, and that means more fortnightlies, specials, and graphic novels.

"We're talking about a team-up between Judge Dredd and Batman; a *Judge Dredd* monthly, and a *Rogue Trooper* manual. And our new title, *Revolver,* will be more of a mixed bag than the rest of the stable. In fact, we're looking at whatever it takes to increase our market share."

Crisis may personify a move toward more socially aware comics. *Third World War* creator Pat Mills summed it up when he said, "There was a time when newspapers referred to comics in a derogatory fashion. But now it seems newspapers are like comics, and comics are taking up the burden of reporting issues."

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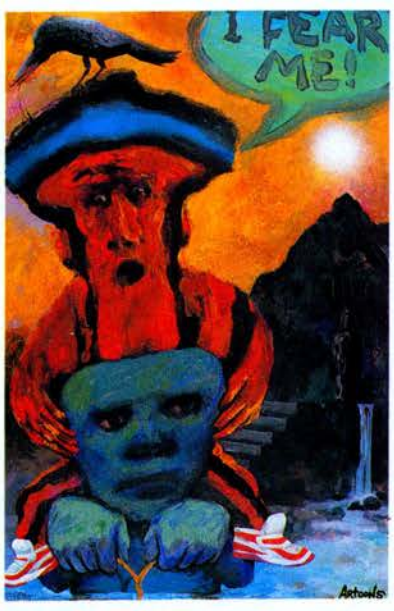

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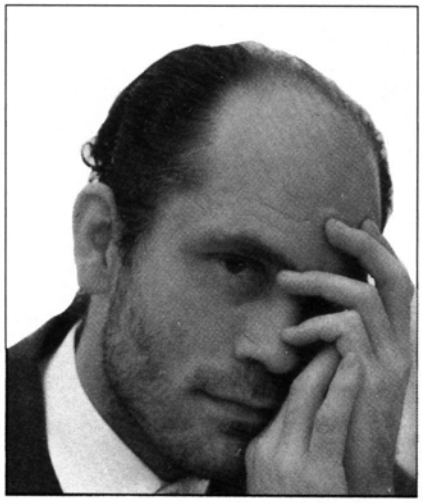

The Killing Note

Last issue this column refuted the recent claim that Splatterpunk is dead and audience interest in explicit horror fiction is on the wain. Phil Nutman now details what Splatterpunk is, what it is not and what position it occupies within the genre.

With the imminent publication of SPLATTERPUNKS, an overview anthology of graphic horror due to appear this autumn in hardcover from St. Martin's Press, this investigation is timely and will hopefully dispell some critical misconceptions which have arisen since the term was first used back in 1986.

Anthology editor Paul M. Sammon, in *Outlaws*, his introductory essay, presents Splatterpunk as follows:-

". . . first remove the limits society and 'good taste' impose on fiction. All the limits. Add a healthy dose of shock, as well as the influence of schlock movies, late-night TV, and the screaming guitar licks of the world's greatest heavy metal band.

"Finally, stir in a strong awareness of pop culture. Season with a no-bullshit attitude. Serve up some of the best writing in the field today.

"And never, ever flinch."

Sammon goes on to state the writers who've brought literature up to date. By bringing in the influences of other media, by fearlessly emphasizing honesty and courage and quality, the best Splatterpunk not only creates prose that is immediate (fiction for now) but prose that is enduring (fiction for tomorrow)."

Let's recap from last issue: Splatterpunk is not a literary movement. It's an attitude, an "angle of attack". Splatterpunk is not explicitness for the sake of the gross out or cheap shot, it is deliberately uncompromising in its presentation of taboos — sex, violence, the sociology of urban life striped down to its primal essence, be it rape, child abuse, big city angst or psychological disturbance.

Basically, there are three writers who are happy to call themselves Splatterpunk: David J. Schow, John Skipp and Craig Spector (although word has it they are now feeling the label has become restrictive). Anyone else who calls themselves by this name is a wannabe. Schow coined the term, an accurate epithet for the style of horror they write, mainly in response to the criticisms leveled at explicit, 'noisy' genre writing by authors including Charles L. Grant and Dennis Etichison. It was deliberately media hip and user-friendly. Other authors of the same generation (post war, baby boomers) that have been lumped into the ghetto include Robert R. McCammon, Ray Garton, Joe R. Lansdale, Richard Christian Matheson and Clive Barker. None of them are Splatterpunks per se, though Barker's ideas and approach comes closest to delineating the overall effect. Some of what they write qualifies as such, but they are writers first and horror authors second. All have tried their hands at other genres.

So, if Splatterpunk is an attitude, where did it originate from?

Horror fiction as we know it today began its renaissance in 1971 with William Peter Blatty's THE EXORCIST. Prior to its presentation of obscenity, blasphemy, violence and sexual explicitness, horror had been gentle. The subject matter was grim, for sure, but the execution was one of restraint. But THE EXORCIST blew that out the window. It was also the genre's most serious work to date.

Explicitness grew out of the anything-goes liberalism of the late 60's. As mainstream cinema became more violent, contraversial, explicit — DIRTY HARRY, A CLOCKWORK ORANGE, SOLDIER BLUE, THE GODFATHER — so too did big screen terror. To accomodate the expanding appetites of movie audiences, Hammer Films piled on the blood and nudity in pictures like LUST FOR A VAMPIRE and FRANKENSTEIN AND THE MONSTER FROM HELL. Correspondingly, horror fiction moved from hinting at the shadow on the stairs to show the creature casting that shadow. Here Sammon cites Richard Matheson's HELL HOUSE (1971) and James Herbert's THE RATS (1974) and THE FOG (1975) as breaking new ground. And let's not forget good old Stephen King, who helped make horror mainstream with the publication of CARRIE and SALEM'S LOT.

With King's success and that of Peter Straub, horror fiction exploded in the late 70s. A lot of it left much to lowest common denominator schlock as numerous hacks jumped on the quick buck bandwagon. In fact it wasn't until the emergence of Clive Barker and THE BOOKS OF BLOOD in the early 80's that explicitness earned legitimacy. By drawing on his literary background and social awareness, Barker probed

the "delights of dread" with almost existential analysis, imbuing his dark visions with an undercurrent of black humour, wrapping it up in a fluid, accessable literary style which proved bloodshed need not pander purely to low brow mentalities. But above all else, THE BOOKS OF BLOOD took the covers off contemporary concerns exposing the rotten flesh beneath. It was ruthless, relentlessly honest fiction that refused to flinch at the truth.

The function of art is to investigate the world around us by mirroring it through the process of re-creating it. To do this the writer or artist or film maker must attempt to open his or her eyes to the truth. And that truth is frequently painful. Being truthful in horror fiction entails taking the covers off; and the main thrust of Splatterpunk's attitude is to show the truth without soft focus lenses ot pretty lighting.

Paul Sammon comments thus: ". . . the primary emotion Splatterpunk first elicits is not revulsion — as one might expect — but *fear.* Not just the charmingly antiquated fear of Lovecraft's LURKER ON THE THRESHOLD, either. We're talking primal, essentially societal fears. Fears that can get you into real trouble. Fear of offending. Fear of *being* offended. Fear of language; fear of sex. Fear of our bodies; fear of our own deaths.

"Obviously, any art form which manages to arouse such emotions carries a potent charge. And this is Splatterpunk's true worth; it's managed to resensitise the horror genre in ways that Lovecraft and Poe and King never even *dreamed* of."

Splatterpunk wants to shock you out of complacency and make you think. As Clive Barker said in an interview back in 1985: "I don't want people to feel comfortable after they've read my stories. I want to get inside their heads and do some damage. I want them to think about the status quo, about the world around them, about their sexuality, about death." Barker's philosophy is best summed up by the ad line for HELLRAISER: "There are no limits."

Exploring new territories and attacking complacency are nothing new per se, but in terms of horror fiction the bulk of the genre's body has been conservative until now. Two writers who have inevitably influenced "The New Horror" — as I referred to the overall trend, of which Splatterpunk is only a sub genre — are Harlan Ellison and J.G. Ballard. Ellison's social criticism, social activism and stubborn refusal of second best in anything fully emerged in the late 60's in stories like *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream. The Whimper of Whipped Dogs,* and the collection DEATHBIRD STORIES, all of which are impossible to ignore, their angry passions frightening in their intensity. On a more cool level, Ballard's ATROCITY EXHIBITION, CRASH and HIGH RISE thrust icepicks into reader's perceptions. Reading either author's work gives the reader a new take on the world around him by confronting elements we'd rather ignore. And if horror is to fulfill its confrontational nature it has to shock the reader out of complacency.

How can explicitness do this? Well, if you just go for the gross-out it won't. What good horror fiction needs is heart and soul at its core. Stories like Skipp and Spector's *Gentlemen* and Joe Lansdale's *The Night They Missed The Horror Show* are deeply moving because the characters and their emotions are real. David Schow's best stories are those that deal with relationships in addition to punching taboos.

Most of the stories which appear in SPLATTERPUNKS anthology deal with subjects other than just killing off characters. Lansdale's *The Night They Missed The Horror Show* is about a head-on collision with racism; Skipp's *Film At Eleven* is about domestic violence; Edward Bryant's *While She Was Out* plays with stalk'n'slash conventions to reveal the heroine's worst nightmare is not the gang of rapists on the street but her stupid, insensitive husband waiting at home; and Roberta Lannes' *Goodbye, Dark Love* deals with incest. All of these and the other twelve stories which comprise the book are powerful, moving tales. Sadly, David Schow is not present for reasons we won't go into here; an unfortunate omission as he is, to quote Sammon, "one of the most wide-ranging and surprisingly romantic of the Splatterpunks."

So, the forthcoming book is not a "definitive" collection, but then it was never intended as such, more a signpost on the Route 66 of recent genre fiction. Look behind the shocking, brutal elements and you will find the heart and soul of good literature, regardless of genre.

This is the reason why readers are embracing "the New Horror", not because it merely panders to base material. But you've got to tell a good story, people with real characters, real emotions . . .

Sadly, Hollywood appears to be going the other way. Good storytelling — as evidenced by this summer's crop of big movies — appears to be dying out as a focus on plot and action pushes character and real emotion into the background. The roller coaster rides keep getting bigger but the characters rolling around in the cars are getting smaller. Where was the character in TOTAL RECALL? or ANOTHER 48 HOURS? ROBOCOP 2 seemed more machine than man. It appears heart and soul is being lost in the race for big box office, a depressing trend that is reaching its apogee this year.

Do the roots of Splatterpunk lie in the Catholic self-doubt of William Peter Blatty?

WHERE HORROR BEGAN

Follow the waters of horror back to their source. Follow too the waters of science fiction and detective fiction. The source? Mike Ashley says: Poe!

It all has to start somewhere. In the case of horror fiction, if you follow the rivers of hell and nightmare back to their source, there you will find the troubled mind of that tragic genius, Edgar Allan Poe. There you will also find waters feeding the growing streams of detective fiction and science fiction. Whilst there was fantastic literature before Poe, it was Poe who gave it a power that it hitherto lacked and who concentrated that force in the short story form in a manner previously untried, and subsequently seldom rivalled.

H.P. Lovecraft, who was himself profoundly influenced by Poe, acknowledged the master's status in his essay on *Supernatural Horror in Literature,* where he said that "Poe's spectres . . . acquired a convincing malignity possessed by none of their predecessors, and established a new standard of realism in the annals of literary horror".

Before Poe there had been horrors aplenty often in the shape of bizzare folk tales or in the recent eruption of gothic tales, born from Horace Walpole's THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO (1976). But the essence of Gothic horror was in its rambling decrepid castles and ancient ghosts. Before Poe, only the German fabulist Ernst Theodore Hoffmann had made any attempt to focus the Gothic atmosphere of gloom and dread in the short story form, and this did successfully, though with much less impact. Hoffmann influenced Poe, but it was Poe who took that extra step bringing the Gothic doom away from its ancient haunts and implanting it in the mind. Poe introduced the real terror of psychological dread, and with that drove the fear of madness into the rational mind.

Poe's inspiration for his stories came from his own tortured life, which was woven with a dark thread of nightmare, much of it brought about through his own temperament. Born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1809, the son of actors, he was orphaned before his third birthday, and was raised by a wealthy merchant, John Allan, who even at that stage recognised Poe's genius. Allan never formally adopted Poe, serving instead, as his godfather. He was a humorless man, finding himself increasingly at odds with his godson's precociousness.

By the time Poe was seventeen, anguish and heartache had entered his life. A secret engagement was terminated when discovered by his fiancee's parents, and the girl was married to another. Poe's godfather refused him spending money because of his profligate habits, and Poe turned to gambling to raise funds. He fell hopelessly into debt. He turned to drink, which had dire effects upon his constitution. Poe quarreled with his godfather and ran away to Baltimore. It was here that he arranged for his first volume of poetry to be published, TAMERLANE AND OTHER POEMS (1827), now a treasured collector's item. Still without funds, Poe enlisted in the army, another period of disaster. Eventually his godfather secured Poe's release on the condition that he entered West Point military academy. Poe further quarreled with his godfather, though, and ended up being expelled from West Point, following a court-martial. This brought him, by 1830, to New York, and then to Baltimore, where he supported himself by journalism and editing, and satisfied his inner desires by writing poetry, and increasingly, short stories. His first story *Metzengerstein,* appeared in 1832. It's the most gothic of his stories, though also hints at madness and retribution.

Poe's life continued to be tortured. His honest views often led to literary disagreements with other writers, whilst he frequently quarreled with his employers constantly endangering his livelihood. In September 1835 he married his cousin, Virginia Clemm, then only thirteen years old. They lived outwardly as brother and sister for two years, but the situation was viewed as a social disgrace. Virginia's health was always weak. A burst blood vessel in 1842 led to further traumas, and she finally died of tuberculosis in 1847, aged twenty-five.

"Poe's inspiration for his stories came from his own tortured life, which was woven with a dark thread of nightmare, much of it brought about through his own temperament."

Poe's fame finally came in 1845, with the publication of his poem. *The Raven,* which was instantly regarded as a classic. For the remainder of his life, and for many years after his death, his reputation was as a poet. It was only gradually that the power of his stories, primarily his horror stories, gave him a wider, and perhaps greater fame.

The most powerful of these began to appear shortly after his marriage, and may have been fuelled by guilt and remorse. Certainly a trio of tales. *Berenice, Morella* and *Ligeia,* all feature women of abnormal psychological influence and compulsion, and stress the power of will over death. Poe began to fear the weakness or loss of his own identity, and the power exerted over it by other, stronger wills. This fear became manifest in the story of dual personalities, *William Wilson,* and in the classic *Fall of the House*

of Usher, which epitomises Poe's morbid fascination for the hopelessness of life and the inevitability of death. It was in this story that Poe considered the nature of catalepsy and the fear of being buried whilst still alive, a theme which emerged with greater potency in *The Premature Burial.*

Fear of madness and death and perhaps the greater fear of being buried alive, now took hold as Poe's stories entered a darker phase. In the last decade of his life he wrote *The Masque of the Red Death, The Pit and the Pendulum, The Tell-Tale Heart, The Black Cat, The Cask of Amontillado* and *Hop-Frog* (his last tale of horror), all stories of madness and revenge. Stephen King has called *The Tell-Tale Heart* "Perhaps the best tale of inside evil ever written . . . where murder is committed out of pure evil, with no mitigating circumstances whatever . . ."

Poe was not evil in himself, but tormented. When he assembled his first collection, Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque, in 1840 (before he turned to his darker tales), he prefaced them with the explanation:

"If, in many of my productions, terror has been the thesis, I maintain that the terror is not of Germany, but of the soul — that I have deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results . . ."

What legitimate sources could there be other than Poe's own tortured soul. His life, plagued by fits of depression, spiralled downward after Virginia's death, though there was a brief respite when he was reunited with his childhood sweetheart, now widowed. But alcohol had now taken hold, and in September 1849, following attendance at a birthday party, he went on a drunken spree, and was found semi-conscious and dying a few days later. His final words were, apparently, "Lord, help my poor soul".

The intense guilt and remorse Poe felt from his ill-spent life was the power that animated his stories and made him one of the most influential writers of all time. In England, Robert Louis Stevenson used Poe's work as the model for *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,* and through Stevenson, Arthur Machen found some of his early influences. Arthur Conan Doyle also looked to one of his "boyhood heroes", Poe's August Dupin, the master detective, who first appeared in the gruesome *The Murders in the Rue Morgue,* as one of the bases for the creation of Sherlock Holmes. In France, Jules Verne was profoundly influenced by Poe's stories, especially THE NARRATIVE OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM OF NANTUCKET. Poe's only novel-length work, in the production of his adventure stories.

Fifty years after Poe's death his work was encountered by the young H.P. Lovecraft who thereafter "became his eternal disciple". Perhaps Poe's most overt influence on Lovecraft will be found in one of Poe's later stories. *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,* where a man is kept alive after his body dies through hypnotism until, released from the trance, the body instantly collapses into putrescent decay.

Poe's influence lives on. If not directly, through his own work, then certainly indirectly through its influence on others, especially H.P. Lovecraft, and even Stephen King, whose THE SHINING owes much to Poe. It also had its influence through the remarkable series of films in the sixties which brought Poe's work to a new generation of fans through the skilful direction of Roger Corman, and the clever scripts by Richard Matheson and Charles Beaumont. Now, new screen adaptations may well bring Poe's work to a new public, and give it a further lease of life. Poe feared the power of death over life, but that very fear is what, in the end, gave him and his creations immortality.

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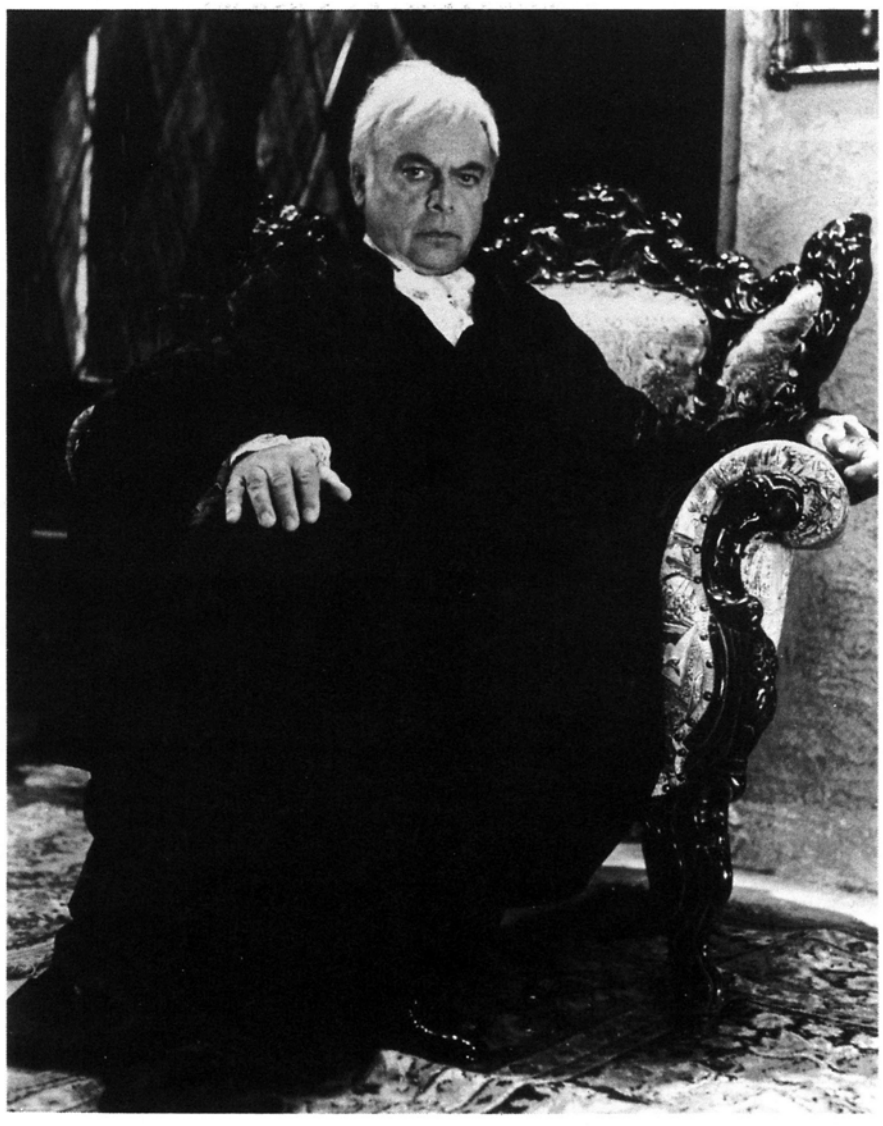

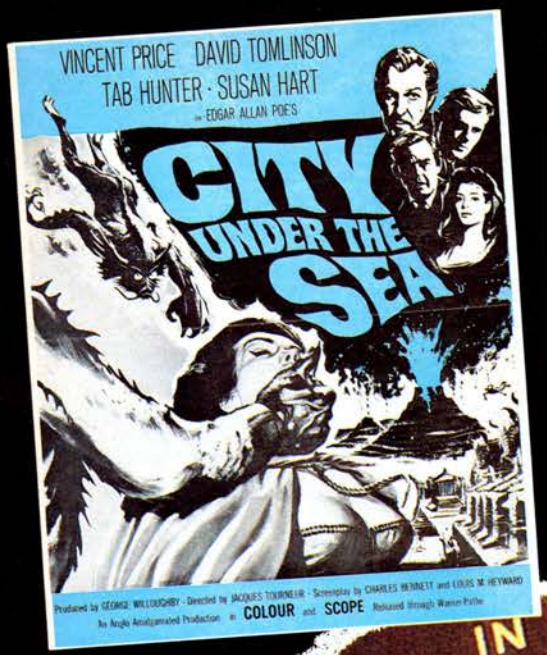
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LOVECRAFT WAITS DREAMING

"I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror . . . I do not think my life will be long. I know too much, and the cult still lives." Simon MacCulloch examines *The Call of Cthulhu*.

"What is the Cthulhu Mythos?" is a question which has persisted to the point of obsession in discussion of the fiction of H P Lovecraft. Answers have ranged from Will Murray's provocative suggestion that "The true Mythos . . . exists in only three Lovecraft stories — the three rightfully considered his greatest: *The Call of Cthulhu, The Colour out of Space,* and *The Dunwich Horror*"[1], to Stefan Dziemianowicz's equally bold assertion that "The Cthulhu Mythos is that nebulous network of amateur and professional fiction in which stories achieve some sort of fellowship through the superficial traits they share"[2]. not to mention those who "find HPL's 'mythos' a useful paradigm in gaining access to the deeper, non-human areas of the subconscious"[3].

Why bother? Well, the short story *The Call of Cthulhu,* written in the summer of 1926, occupies a central position both chronologically and thematically in Lovecraft's fiction, consolidating a concept towards which he has been working as early as *Dagon* (1917) and which he would be elaborating as late as *The Haunter of the Dark* (1935). The extent to which that concept has captured the imaginations of readers and writers (not to mention practising occultists — and we shan't again in this essay) remains the most convincing measure of his artistic achievement. And that achievement is viewed by many as the greatest to which 20th century horror literature can lay claim.

"The Great Old Ones . . . lived ages before there were any men, and . . . came to the young world out of the sky. Those Old Ones were gone now, inside the earth and under the sea; but their dead bodies had told their secrets in dreams to the first men, who formed a cult which had never died . . . There were arts which could revive Them when the stars had come round again to the right positions in the cycle of eternity . . . They all lay in stone houses in Their great city of R'lyeh, preserved by the spells of mighty Cthulhu for a glorious resurrection when the stars might once more be ready for Them . . . and the secret priests would take great Cthulhu from His tomb to revive His subjects and resume His rule of earth. The time would be easy to know, for then mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil . . . and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom."

In this extract from *The Call of Cthulhu* we can identify two essential elements of the fictional matter on which whatever it is we call the Cthulhu Mythos is based. These are, firstly, the Great Old Ones themselves — sorry. Themselves; secondly, the means by which and context in which They are perceived by the human race. The former has yielded a tribe of extraterrestial entities —

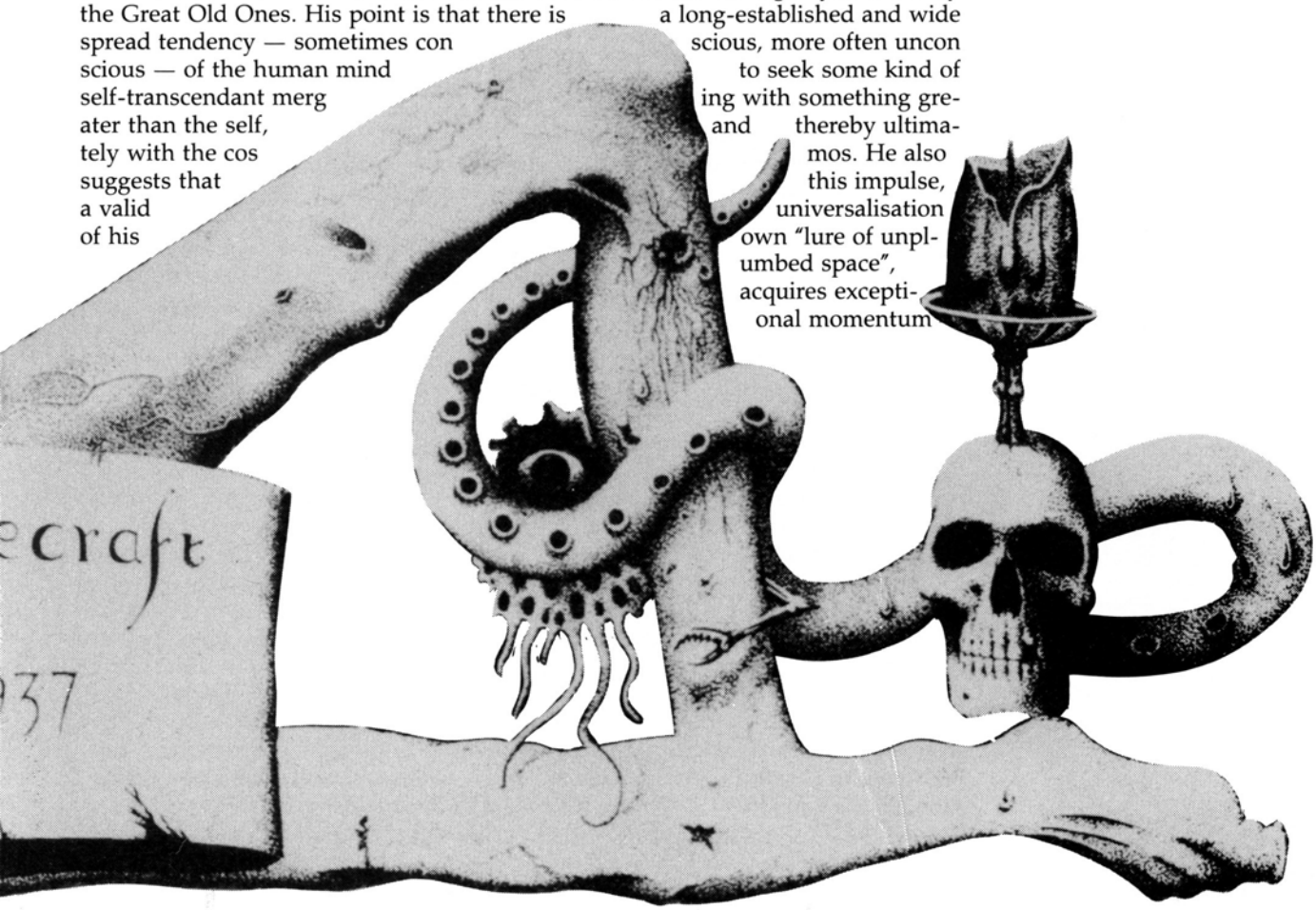
principally Azathoth, Yog-Sothoth and Nyarlathotep — together with their diverse exotic avatars, minions, rivals and habitats. The latter has generated a library of textbooks, Abdul Alhazred's Necronomicon chief among them, and fuelled activities ranging from the primitive worship of the Cthulhu cult to the scientific procedure of the Miskatonic University, typified in individuals such as the "dark and goatish" Wilbur Whateley and his adversary, the "erudite Henry Armitage (A. M. Miskatonic, Ph.D. Princeton, Litt. D. Johns Hopkins)". Obviously, the above extract takes the viewpoint of the former, so in terms of Lovecraft's concept of the Mythos, as opposed to its fictional constituents, it gives us only half the picture.

To appreciate the full picture, we ought to begin by asking what Lovecraft's use for these inventions was. Presumably, it was to assist his fiction in the performance of that which he regarded as the essential function of supernatural horror in literature — the creation in the reader of a sense of cosmic dread, awe mixed with horror. As a guide to the writing of a fictional recipe which might produce this effect. Lovecraft no doubt had regard to other writers whom he held in esteem. But more importantly, we can assume he relied as any writer does upon his own responses to imaginative stimuli.

Lovecraft wrote that "My most poignant emotional experiences . . . concern the lure of unplumbed space, the terror of the encroaching outer void, and the struggle of the ego to transcend the known and established order of time, space, matter, force, geometry and natural law in general." Equally: "Time, space and natural law hold for me suggestions of intolerable bondage, and I can form no picture of emotional satisfaction which does not involve their defeat — especially the defeat of time, so that one may merge oneself with the whole historic stream and be wholly emancipated from the transient and the ephemeral."

These statements indicate a powerful emotional desire to transcend the finite viewpoint of the mortal individual so as to be one with the cosmos, coupled with an equally powerful intellectual conviction that the cosmos is arranged so as to frustrate that desire. Lovecraft's understanding was that "common human laws and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large", and this philosophy of "cosmic indifferentism" was the fundamental premise of his stories. What happens in them is designed to convey that understanding and its implications for the way in which human beings exercise the faculty of their imagination, collectively and individually, with regard to their place in the scheme of things.

In *The Call of Cthulhu*, Lovecraft presents the activity of dreaming, perhaps the oldest and most universal exercise of the human imagination, as humanity's channel of communion with the vast indifferent forces of the cosmos-at-large, symbolised by the Great Old Ones. His point is that there is a long-established and widespread tendency — sometimes conscious, more often unconscious — of the human mind to seek some kind of self-transcendant merging with something greater than the self, and thereby ultimately with the cosmos. He also suggests that this impulse, a valid universalisation of his own "lure of unplumbed space", acquires exceptional momentum



"He did not believe in the Great Old Ones, but he was convinced of the validity of what they represented, the cosmic indifference to mankind which was the core of his philosophy."

when it is pursued collectively. And in the form of the Cthulhu cult, he represents its foremost vehicle of expression in the society of his own day and no doubt of our own: religion and mysticism in all its forms.

If the Cthulhu cult's vision of a "holocaust of ecstasy and freedom" is identified with Lovecraft's own desire to "be wholly emancipated from the transient and the ephemeral", we can easily see in the opponents of the cult the counterbalancing intellectual conviction of their creator's that the cosmos simply will not entertain such presumption on the art of its biological ephemera. The scientifically-minded investigators who view the Great Old Ones in their true perspective as indifferent engines of mankind's destruction rather than anthropomorphic instruments of its salvation embody as impulse opposite to the religious/mystical urge towards self-transcendent merging: the scientific/rational inclination to delineate precisely mankind's true insignificant place in the cosmos and hold him strictly to it until new facts suggest otherwise.

So we can take *The Call of Cthulhu* and its followers in the Lovecraft oevre as its author's dramatisation, through the metaphor of a struggle between the "cultist" and the "investigator" responses to the existence of the Great Old Ones, of his own internal dichotomy between a desire for emotional satisfaction and an insistence upon intellectual clarity in the face of an indifferent cosmos — a dichotomy which he saw reflected in society at large by the usually polarised viewpoints of religion/mysticism and science/rationality.

The dramatic tension which Lovecraft creates and sustains through his careful balancing of the implications for human beings of pursuing to the extreme either of these two responses is a major factor in the success of these stories. On the one hand, those who seek to be "as the Great Old Ones" are shown to be deluded, barbaric, depraved — less than human in all respects save one: the superhuman transports of emotional delight in which their delusion enables them to indulge together. Those who, by contrast, have "looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror" with unblinking clarity are by virtue of their extraordinary perception set intellectually far above the ignorant mass of humanity, and stand nobly at the forefront of the forces of civilisation: yet their knowledge tends to render them emotional cripples, estranged from their fellows, suicidally depressed and nervously debilitated to the point of insanity. While the "cultist" sacrifices integrity of mind to a collective delusion, trading his sense of discrete identity for participation in an ecstatic dream, the "investigator" preserves integrity of mind by independently renouncing all sense of belonging in the cosmos, holding fast to an understanding of his place in the scheme of things whose price is alienation from a reality more starkly unsympathetic than his fellows can comprehend. Either the intellect or the emotions must be denied; the individual is either devoured utterly by dream, or exiled eternally from it.

Lovecraft himself preferred the stance of the alienated rationalist to that of the committed believer. It is Armitage and his ilk, after all, who are right about the nature of the Great Old Ones and the consequences for mankind of their awakening; in the end, it is chance, not the preparation of the cultists, which releases Cthulhu, and there is no "ecstasy and freedom" for mankind in His resurrection, only casual destruction. Nevertheless, as S T Joshi has pointed out, Lovecraft "was a scientist at heart, and that gave him a love of clarity. But he was also a dreamer . . . "[4] And he felt the desire to "merge oneself with the whole historic stream" with sufficient acuity to declare "I Am Providence" — a statement of self-transcendent faith whose value to his imaginative life is emphasised not least by its appearance on his gravestone. It need not surprise us that he sought a third option whereby the seemingly irreconcilable aims of emotional joy and intellectual truth might be united, not that he found that option in the imaginative exercise which the readers and writers of literature regularly perform.

In reading aesthetically successful fiction we seem temporarily to transcend our time-and-space-bound perspective to partake of the dream of another, perhaps greater (certainly different), imagination than our own. If the fiction is supernatural horror as Lovecraft practised it, that merging of minds will bring with it the illusion of being "wholly emancipated from the transient and the ephemeral" which he regarded as the apogee of emotional fulfilment. At the same time, Lovecraft like any serious writer sought in his fiction to express the unmitigated truth about man's place in the order of things, thus maintaining the intellectual integrity which purely escapist fantasy lacks; he did not believe in the Great Old Ones, but he was convinced of the validity of what they represented, the cosmic indifference to mankind which was the core of his philosophy. With *The Call of Cthulhu*, Lovecraft achieved a truthful delusion in which perception and delight are fused with such skill that the reader feels, with Lovecraft's Outsider,

that "in my new wildness and freedom I almost welcome the bitterness of alienage".

As we have noted, Lovecraft was aware that the efficacy of the imagination was increased when it was exercised in concert. It was perfectly logical, therefore, that having evolved a satisfactory equation for achieving through his art a synthesis of the non-rational and rational approaches to the problem of an indifferent cosmos, he encouraged the active involvement of other writers in the production of further material based on his formula. Such involvement could and did enhance the lifelikeness, and thus the affective power, of the dream, in the same way that mutually held beliefs reinforce each other in society at large. The price was that the intellectual integrity of the fiction was correspondingly reduced, as different writers had the Great Old Ones represent different things, or nothing at all. This trend continued after Lovecraft's death, to the point where most Cthulhu Mythos fiction was not a fusion of emotional fulfilment with intellectual clarity, but an escapist indulgence which writers and critics sympathetic to Lovecraft's original aim rightly came to view with the same distaste registered by the author's fictional investigators when confronted with the identical self-gratifying delusions of the Cthulhu cultists.

Happily, there are enough writers and critics of this disposition working today to reinsert the viewpoint of the alienated rationalist in the equation to balance that of the committed believer. It may be that despite such work the Cthulhu Mythos can now be said to be nothing more than such fictitious history as may be derived from the sum of writings which have sought to reinforce, helpfully or otherwise, the verisimilitude of *The Call of Cthulhu* by explicit use or elaboration of its peculiar fictional constituents. But the achievement of *The Call of Cthulhu* itself will remain undiminished as long as readers can sense, behind the fake horror of the Great Old Ones, the true horror of a cosmos indifferent to mankind. Lovecraft's dream has not died, but has been preserved through the imaginations of its followers; whenever our own stars are right, our minds aligned with the pattern of Lovecraft's view of the cosmos, we can resurrect it in all its dread glory, and find to our surprise that it is not the idle wish-fulfilling daydream which its more credulous disciples have made of it, but a ruthlessly efficient nightmare. The type of nightmare which enables us to assimilate as far as possible those aspects of experience which disturb us most deeply, the better to face reality again upon awakening.

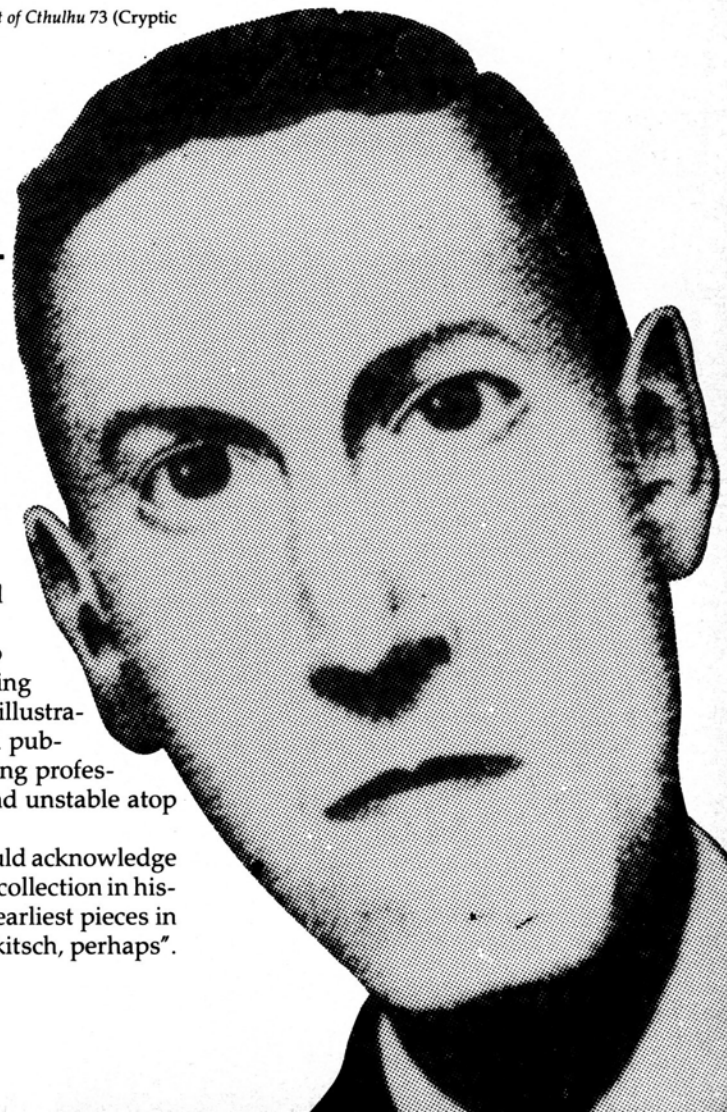
"Those Old Ones were gone now, inside the earth and under the sea; but their dead bodies had told their secrets in dreams to the first men, who formed a cult which had never died . . ."

Notes:

1. Will Murray, "An Uncompromising Look at the Cthulhu Mythos", in *Lovecraft Studies* 12 (Necronomicon Press, Spring 1986).
2. Stefan Dziemianowicz, review of *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* (Arkham House, 1990), in *Crypt of Cthulhu* 73 (Cryptic Publications, St John's Eve 1990).
3. Mick Lyons, letter in *Lovecraft Studies* 19/20 (Fall 1989).
4. S T Joshi, in *H P Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism* (Ohio University Press, 1980), p 43.

TALES OF THE CTHULHU MYTHOS by H P Lovecraft and Divers Hands. Illustrated by Jeffrey K Potter. Arkham House, 1990. S23.95 hardback.

"Now the beast-masked priest lifted the bound and weakly writhing girl in his brutish hands and held her up toward that horror on the monolith. And as that monstrosity sucked in its breath, lustfully and slobberingly, something snapped in my brain and I fell into a merciful faint." (Robert E Howard, "The Black Stone".)



Similarly stretched to breaking point has been the patience of more than one Lovecraft critic at the sight of the hardbound and weakly writhing body of fiction which comprises the 1990 Golden Anniversary Anthology edition of Arkham House's *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* being offered up in centennial tribute to the lustful slobbering of an audience whose low tastes are presumed to have survived the unspeakably distant epoch of pre-war American pulp magazine fiction to which half of the 22 stories belong. The titillating new flesh of J K Potter's nine nightmarish airbrush/photo-collage illustrations is admittedly little recompense for the re-enactment of a foul publishing rite whereby the ghost of inept fan writing and unconvincing professional hackwork is summoned again to squat bloated, repulsive and unstable atop the gaunt monolith of Lovecraft's literary achievement.

Nevertheless, emerging from the frenzy of our metaphor, we should acknowledge that editor James Turner's intelligent new introduction ably puts the collection in historical perspective. He is even prepared to admit that "a few of the earliest pieces in this volume by certain 'divers hands' now seem like pop — cultural kitsch, perhaps".

Above all, he has added some half dozen stories which, while not original to this collection, did not appear in the first edition in 1969, because they had then yet to be written and most of these are excellent.

For example, Fritz Leiber's elegant *The Terror from the Depths* where the epigraphic invocation of the ghost of Hamlet's father unfolds into an awesome pattern of entrapment within the irremediably unsympathetic dream of a cold and inscrutable Other: Lovecraft, father of the Mythos, for the characters in Leiber's tale; Azathoth, the All-Fatherer, for the cosmos at large. Karl Edward Wagner's justly celebrated *Sticks* also exploits the ironic possibilities of a world in which WEIRD TALES magazine co-exists with the horrors it thrived on. This development reaches an exquisitely fitting conclusion in Richard A Lupoff's *Discovery of the Ghooric Zone*; the power of Lovecraft's vision is magnified in space and projected through time to the extent that his fondest wish — to "merge oneself with the whole historic stream and be wholly emancipated from the transient and the ephemeral" — seems fulfilled, and his dream is the doom of the whole trapped and demented human species.

For Lupoff's unhappy cyborg trio, stranded beyond Pluto, or Philip Jose Farmer's *The Freshman*, forever trapped in the equally dreadful environs of a Miskatonic University found through a simple desire for independence warped beyond endurance, the epiphany is the same: the cosmos will always be unutterably and unbearably strange, and there is no way out. Little wonder, then, that those who value the opportunity to experience that epiphany within the safer confines of the written word are aghast at the process of familiarisation in which the requisite fictional constituents tend to be reduced to the cosy predictability and reassuring consistency of the characters and premises of the average television soap opera.

Fortunately, we can number James Turner among those who grow faint at such a prospect. Small-minded notions of systematisation rightly repel him, and the new faces he has introduced to the old scenario are anything but reassuring. Together they add sufficient vigour to the struggles of this desperate yet alluring fictional corpus against the bonds of its conventions to suggest that there may just be hope for it yet.

Reviewed by Simon MacCulloch

All artwork — Dave Carson

Skeleton Crew, October 1990

PORTFOLIO

DAVE CARSON — DREAMER OF THE DARK

Belfast, 1955. In streets later made famous by Van Morrison's music and the shriek of sectarian violence, the young Dave Carson grew. Memories of those times haunt him still — most

DAVE CARSON — DREAMER OF THE DARK

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THE SECRET SONG

Arthur Machen — the British writer especially associated with 'the Angels of Mons' legends, those battlefield visions of the first world war — described Edgar Allan Poe as 'the supreme realist'.

There is a challenging sense in Poe's stories that our sophisticated logic is but the doorstep to the house of madness. Horror is not the colourful description of the unthinkable, but a hovering about the consequences of our being on earth. Suppose Poe were living today. *The Pit and the Pendulum* would easily be updated, a computerised pendulum swinging lower and lower over a victim, not chained, but sufficiently drugged to prevent mobility. The victim of *The Cask of Amontillado* would be a presenter on some television programme about wine, the vengeful host a man whose business had been ruined by some adverse consumer report. Wine would make a good subject, for even a glass of wine was sufficient to throw Poe off balance emotionally as well as physically. Perhaps there was something in the writer's constitution that made him especially vulnerable to such influences, almost as if his sensitivity enabled him to hear music that no-one else could. In short, in reading the Poe narratives, one might come close to the writer — if you are brave enough.

Any attempt to discern the secret of Edgar Allan Poe's writing would begin in Ireland, that home of remarkable legends and senses unexplained by science. His forebears came from County Cavan, where they were tenant farmers. A certain David Poe of Dring, County Cavan, had a son, John, who, having married a Jane McBride, emigrated to America in 1750. Their son, David, a craftsman wheel-maker served in the American Army under George Washington during the War of Independence and had, I believe, something to do with army ordnance (stores and provisions). He was to be the grandfather of Edgar Allan Poe, born to David's son (yet another David, in order to sustain the family name) who had married a young widow by the name of Hopkins.

It is almost certain that the original David Poe of Dring was a descendant of one of two brothers, David and Jonathan Powell, who came with Oliver Cromwell in the invasion of Ireland during the mid seventeenth century. Thus, Edgar Allan Poe, born on January 19th 1809, though sometimes called, 'America's greatest writer' in his day, was like so many other Americans of Irish descent, and probably had English patriachs. 'Powell' is for that matter a Welsh surname, and the themes which Poe explored had some Celtic aspects. The great axe pendulum in one of his best stories was reminiscent of the great weapons wielded long ago by Celtic chieftains, the themes of vengeance more appropriate to Celtic than to Anglo-Saxon traditions.

A further mystery beyond that of literary origins relates to Poe's own childhood. His parents were travelling players, but died when Poe was an infant, about two years of age. By some arrangement, he was adopted by a wealthy businessman of Richmond, Virginia — a man who had so constructed his timber home as to make it look like a Greek temple. There was much competition for architectural prestige in the southern states, and pseudo-Greek and pseudo-Roman styles were hardly unusual. But in this case, the influence may have gone beyond architecture and into Greek mythology, which abounds with fantasy and disaster, Superman corrupted by power, monsters which destroy men by their alluring appearance. Poe's childhood was in any case hardly one of Benjamin Franklin primers and daily piety of the kind prescribed for American youngsters, for he was whisked off the England by his adoptive parents, being placed in a school 'among the leafy lanes of Stoke Newington'. Poe's forebears had been of rigorous and puritanial stock, up to Edgar's father at least; there must have been a tension between the environment of a home where money was abundant and the old virtues born of wresting a living from the reluctant soil.

The restless nature, reflected in so much of Poe's work, accounted for the early disasters. On returning to Virginia, he tried university education, service in the army as a private, then as a West Coast cadet, but found it hard to settle to anything. After running up gambling debts and getting into mischief which, by modern standards, might be considered of no more consequence than a parking offence, he was thrust from the bosom of his adoptive family. It must have seemed a little like walking out of the Parthenon . . .

The stories that have over decades thrilled readers, and more recently listeners to radio and recording adaptations, not to mention the films made by Roger Corman et al., were written over a relatively short period, the 1830s and 1840s. Considering that he had been written off by his family as a young man without much prospect, Edgar

"Edgar Allan Poe, born on January 19th 1809, though sometimes called, 'America's greatest writer' in his day, was like so many other Americans of Irish descent, and probably had English patriachs."

Allan Poe was a prolific writer. Marrying a young cousin, Virginia, he tried to earn a living from his pen which, then as now, was a prospect as daunting as having supper with a mad magician. He attempted to write pot-boilers of the type that would today be adapted for a television mini-series, and *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* was an interesting attempt to develop the crime genre then in its infancy. But Poe was really too fine a writer to be popular, and most book buyers were in any case 'respectable people' with largely English backgrounds. This was perhaps the reason for a colleague's suggestion that Poe give up his notions and 'join the moral section of society'. However, the prospect of securing an income by churning out happy froth did not appeal to Poe. Perhaps in his day and, to an extent not always so in ours, the horror genre was a way of exploring human nature, the depths of the mind. It was true, as literary critics have suggested, that Poe had so little a sense of humour — and thus a sense of perspective — that he had a tendency to pile horror upon horror. The work of Roger Corman and Vincent Price, in film adaptations of Poe's work, has been aided by their abilities to 'shade' the stories, and even at times, to add an element of humour, which is after all an essential aspect of human experience.

Still, one can hardly blame Edgar Allan Poe for thinking that life was an accumulation of disasters, with the declining health of his wife, the unpaid bills, and days

"The man who had written lines like 'all my days are trances' was himself moving away from what we fancifully call 'hard reality'."

"Still, one can hardly blame Edgar Allan Poe for thinking that life was an accumulation of disasters, with the declining health of his wife, the unpaid bills, and days without much in the way of food."

without much in the way of food. There were times when income permitted some modest luxury. Thus, we read in a letter written to his mother in law (who came to live with her daughter) during April 1844, of a stay at Morrisons Boarding House in New York, a building which 'has brown steps with a porch of brown pillars'. If Poe was in town in order to visit a publisher, or editor potentially interested in his work, a good meal was necessary, as he related in the letter:

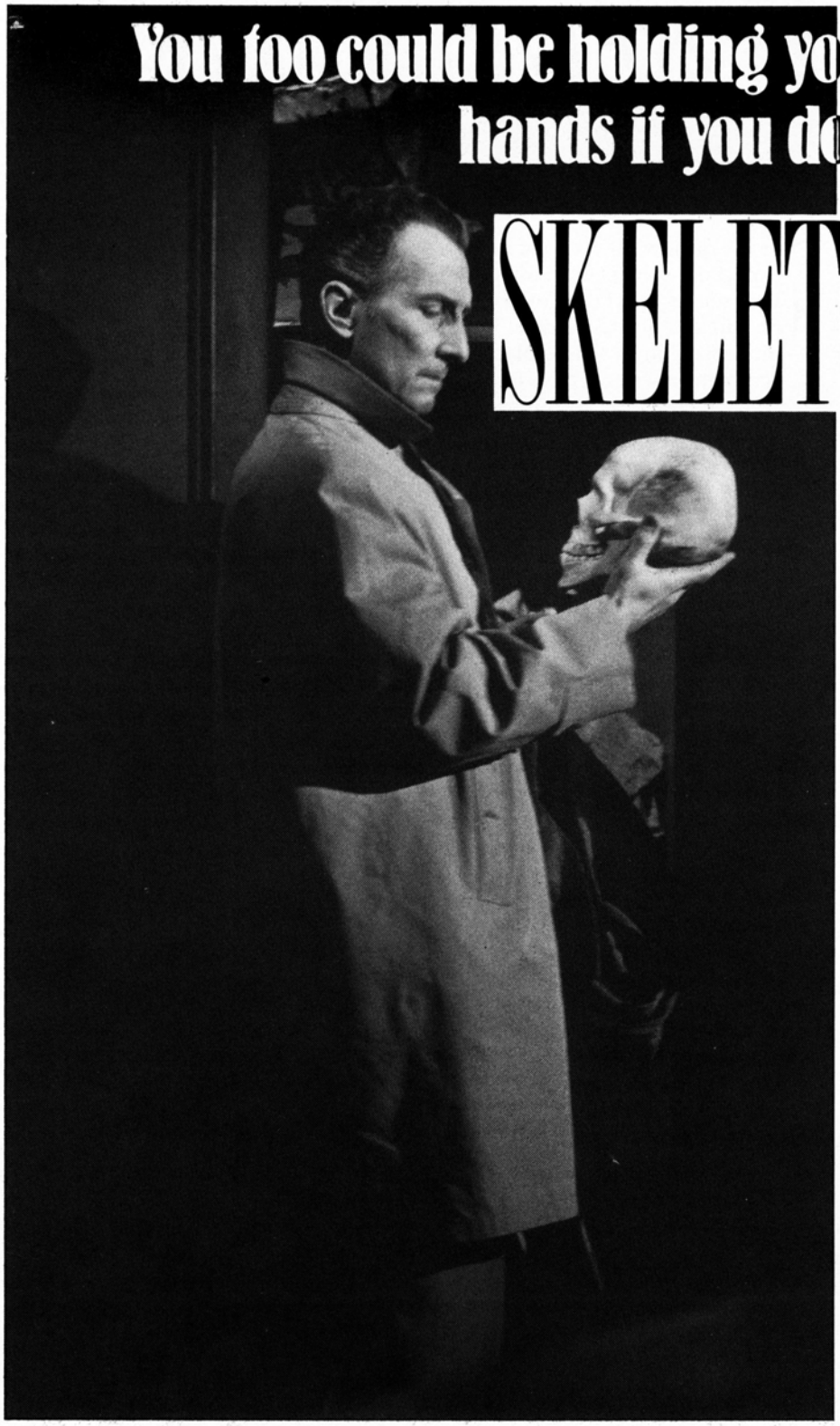
"Last night for supper, we had the nicest tea you ever drank, strong and hot; wheat bread and rye bread; cheese; elegant tea cakes; two dishes of ham and two of veal, piled up like a mountain."

Edgar Allan Poe was no gourmet and would have been astonished to learn that fortunes could be made by informing people how and what to eat. We know that he enjoyed good ham and hot tea, perhaps recalling Dr Samuel Johnson's dictum that a man who does not look after his belly will hardly be able to look after anything else. Even good ham and hot tea must have been in short supply at times, as money invariably was. Poe's writing was done in a somewhat spartan, six roomed cottage of farmhouse originally built in 1816, situated at Fordham in the hills above New York City. He had bought this somewhat isolated property in the hope that his wife, suffering from tuberculosis, might regain her help, whilst some ground nearby permitted a vegetable plot. In this white pine shingle cottage — hardly larger than a decent garage as some would consider it now — close to an orchard and to wooded hill country, Poe attempted to earn a living. He wrote poetry, such of it outstanding, yet often eclipsed by his horror stories; he turned out informed literary criticism; he offered fiction by the yard to publishers who had never heard of Fordham or even of Poe. Life was so hard at times that neighbours brought food to the hard-pressed family. So poor were the trio, Poe, his wife and his mother in law, that we learn that Virginia slept on a straw mattress with only Poe's overcoat to cover her. When at last, the story of Poe's plight became known during the mid 1840s, those who knew about his poetry — a somewhat small circle of perceptive people — rushed to offer aid, this party including newspapermen from New York eager to produce headlines of the 'Brave Poet Does Best To Survive' style. In fact, there was some brief revival of interest, some of the poems were reprinted, but there was no lasting recognition of Poe's possibilities. When Virginia died, Poe collapsed in what appeared to have been a condition verging on madness, as it would have been diagnosed then. The man who had written lines like 'all my days are trances' were himself moving away from what we fancifully call 'hard reality'.

In October 1939, some ninety years after Poe's all too early death, the NBC radio network of New York, in association with Columbia University, broadcast a series of Sunday afternoon programmes about great American poets. Understandably, Poe was one of the very first choices, broadcast on October 29th and thus coincidentally with a new wave of insanity in western Europe, the Second World War. After a period of neglect, Poe's cottage was revisited and shown in a booklet to accompany the programmes. True, the place had become something of a literary shrine, but the general sense was one of neglect, the grass high around the cottage, the trees attempting to obliterate all traces of the poet's workplace. Perhaps as the broadcasters stood there, one or two might have sensed that song that no-one else heard, save Edgar Allan Poe. He had remarked, 'it is in music that the soul most nearly attains the supreme ends for which it struggles'. Such a music, Arthur Machen noted, runs through Poe's work, making us forget his plots and to remember the strange beauty of its phases, 'the murmured incantation of the melody to which he sets his story'.

The cottage in that early year of the Second World War had been kept much as Poe had left it at death, but any tourist could easily have overlooked it. The broad panelled door had an old iron knocker which, when used, sounded almost like a flat stroke of fate. Inside, the barely furnished rooms held little save an old rocking chair and the broad table on which Poe wrote. Here, he had left his Bible, marked at two Bible points — Revelation Chapter 3, verse 20, and Luke Chapter 11. The Revelation verse is said to have inspired Holman Hunt, the artist, in the creation of his famous painting, *The Light of the World*; the Luke passage is one of the best known in that Gospel. That no-one lived in the cottage was hardly surprising, given its lack of amenities, but since those days, a new interest in the Poe Countryside has emerged. Perhaps the sense in 1939 that an aura of contentment now claimed the hill, in place of the turmoil of Poe's own lifetime, was the last word.

Today, when horror stories have a new, thoughtful following and when new themes are being explored, Poe might be said to have placed landmarks along those strange paths. It is probably true that he was obsessed by death as some have argued, but this was, I think, written in his genes. His stories are repetitions of folk memories deep in the psyche, part perhaps of the fictions that men drew from a common, deep well. Fine writer that he was, Poe interpreted the horrific dimensions of the modern world s related to all kinds of aspirations and misinterpreted ideals.



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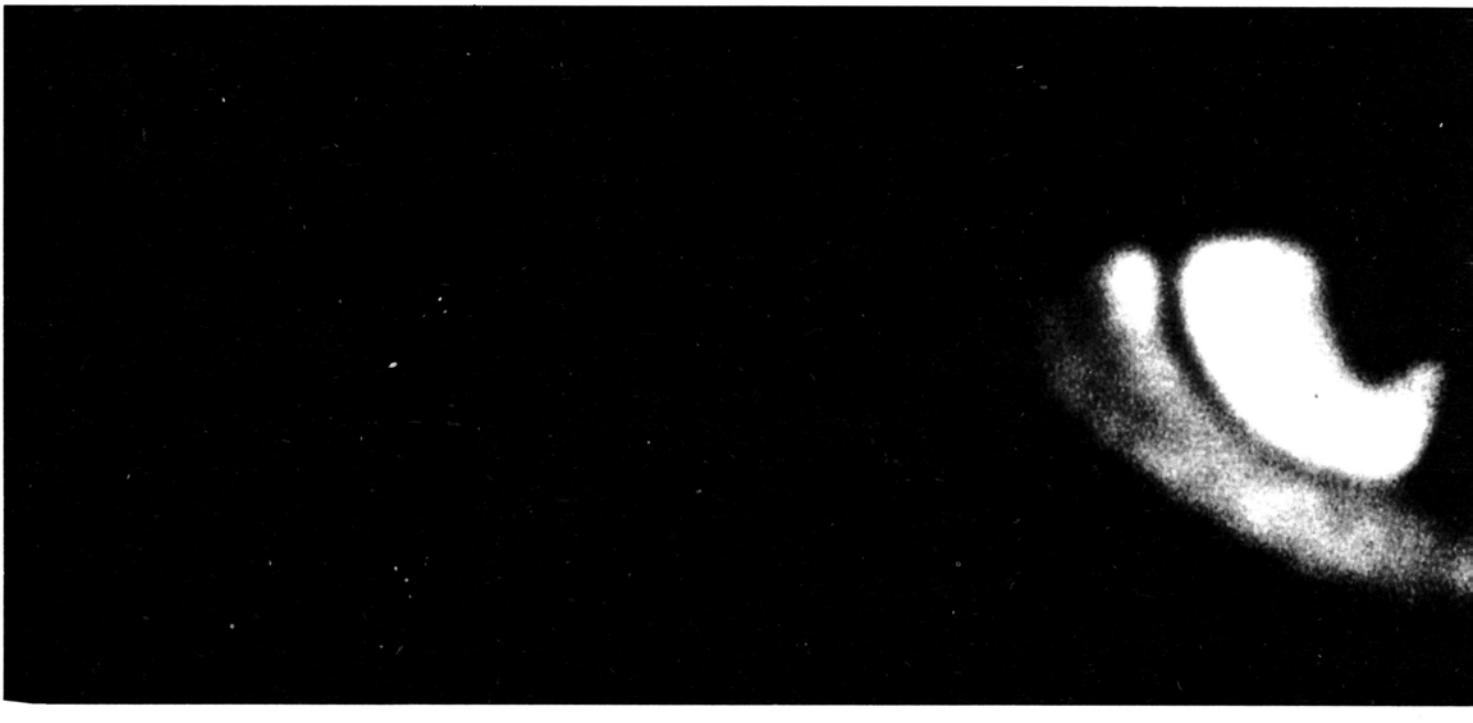
Edgar Allan Poe — first and last. Father of the modern horror story, father of the crime novel, his influence spreads in a direct line from his work through HP Lovecraft to such modern masters as Ramsey Campbell. This classic story, *The Black Cat,* demonstrates why his influence and genius are as relevant today as when he wrote it.

For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not — and very surely do I not dream. But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburden my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified — have tortured — have destroyed me. Yet I will not attempt to expound them. To me, they have presented little but horror — to many they will seem less terrible than baroques. Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the commonplace — some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects.

From my infancy I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions. I was especially fond of animals, and was indulged by my parents with a great variety of pets. With these I spent most of my time, and never was so happy as when feeding and caressing them. This peculiarity of character grew with my growth, and, in my manhood, I derived from it one of my principal sources of pleasure. To those who have cherished an affection for a faithful and sagacious dog, I need hardly be at the trouble of explaining the nature of the intensity of the gratification thus derivable. There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man.

I married early, and was happy to find in my wife a disposition not uncongenial with my own. Observing my partiality for domestic pets, she lost no opportunity of procuring those of the most agreeable kind. We had birds, gold-fish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and a cat.

This latter was a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree. In speaking of his intelligence, my wife, who at heart was not a little tinctured with superstition, made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise. Not that she was ever serious upon this point — and I mention the matter at all for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered.



Pluto — this was the cat's name — was my favourite pet and playmate. I alone fed him, and he attended me wherever I went about the house. It was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets.

Our friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years, during which my general temperament and character — through the instrumentality of the fiend Intemperance — had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others. I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence. My pets. of course, were made to feel the change in my disposition. I not only neglected, but ill-used them. For Pluto, however, I still retained sufficient regard to restrain me from maltreating him, as I made no scruple of maltreating the rabbits, the money, or even the dog, when by accident, or through affection, they came in my way. But my disease grew upon me — for what disease is like alcohol? — and at length even Pluto, who was now becoming old, and consequently somewhat peevish — even Pluto began to experience the effects of my ill-temper.

One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame. I took from my waistcoat pocket a pen-knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket! I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity.

When reason returned with the morning — when I had slept off the fumes of the night's debauch — I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty; but it was, at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excess, and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed.

In the meantime the cat slowly recovered. The socket of the lost eye presented, it is true, a frightful appearance, but he no longer appeared to suffer any pain. He went about the house as usual, but, as might be expected, fled in extreme terror at my approach. I had so much of my old heart left, as to be at first grieved by this evident dislike on the part of a creature which had once so loved me. But this feeling soon gave place to irritation. And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS. Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart — one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of man. Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not? Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such? This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself — to offer violence to its own nature — to do

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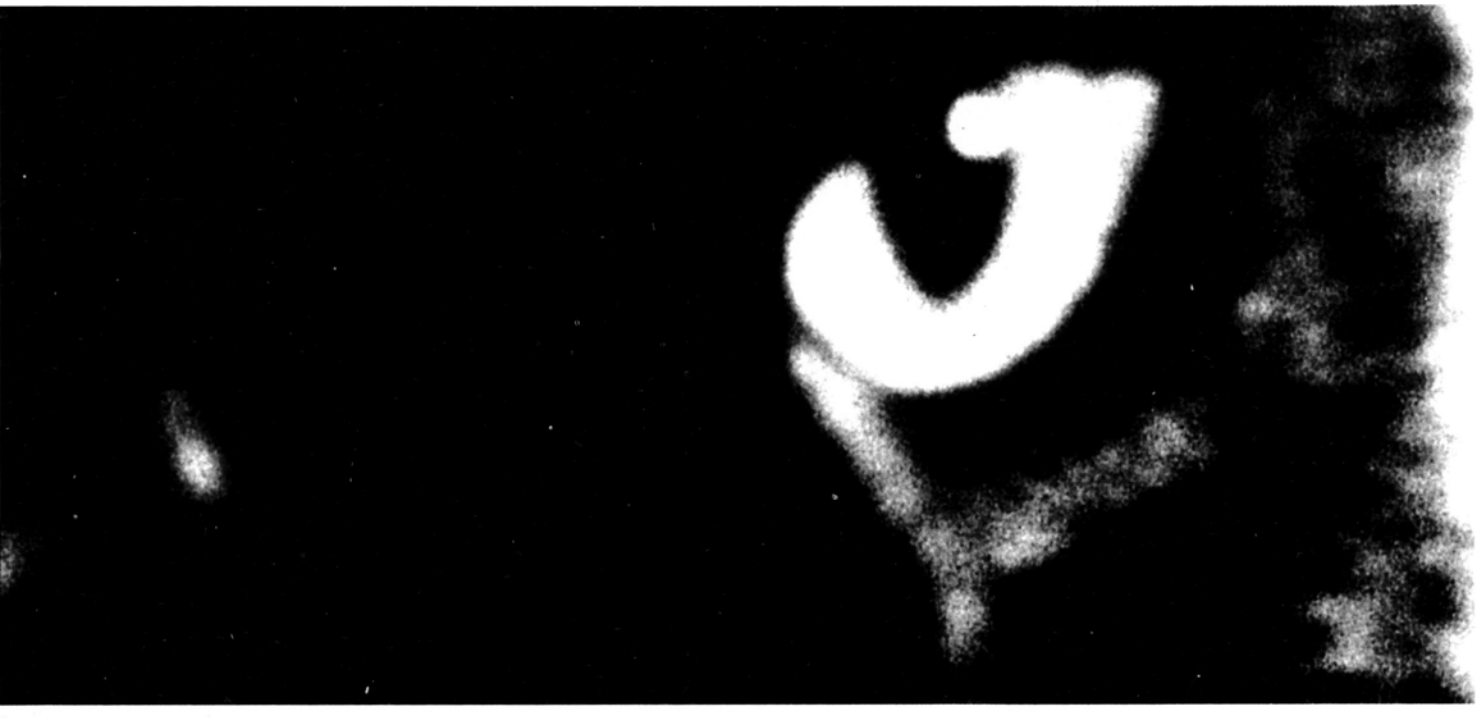


wrong for the wrong's sake only — that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute. One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree — hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with it the bitterest remorse at my heart — hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence — hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin — a deadly sin that would so jeopardies my immortal soul as to place it — if such a thing were possible — even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.

On the night of the day on which this cruel deed was done, I was aroused from my sleep by the cry of "Fire!" The curtains of my bed were in flames. The whole house was blazing. It was with great difficulty that my wife, a servant, and myself, made our escape from the conflagration. The destruction was complete. My entire worldly wealth was swallowed up, and I resigned myself thenceforward to despair.

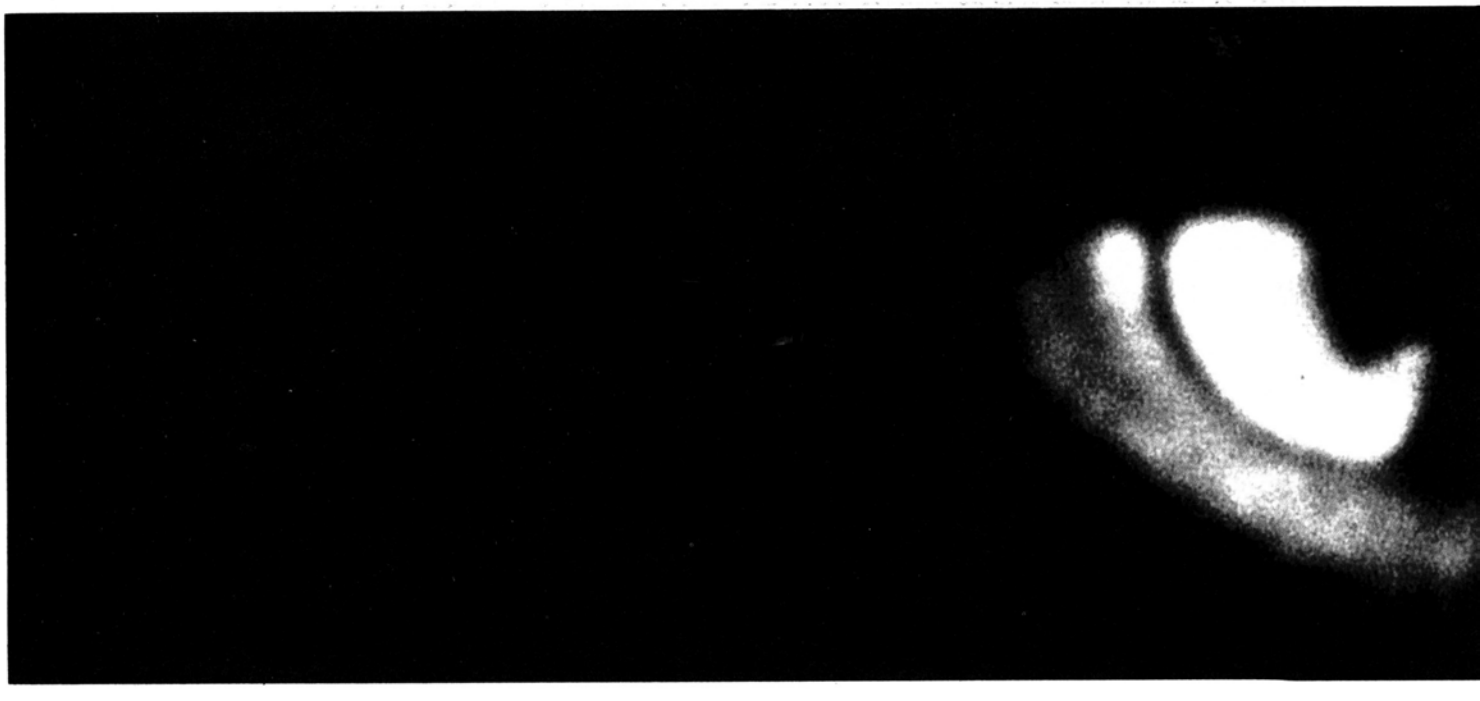
I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect between the disaster and the atrocity. But I am detailing a chain of facts, and wish not to leave even a possible link imperfect. On the day succeeding the fire, I visited the ruins. The walls, with one exception, had fallen in. This exception was found in a compartment wall, not very thick, which stood about the middle of the house, and against which had rested the head of my bed. The plastering had here, in great measure, resisted the action of the fire — a fact which I attributed to its having been recently spread. About this wall a dense crowd were collected, and many persons seemed to be examining a particular portion of it with very minute and eager attention. The words "strange!" "singular!" and other similar expressions, excited my curiosity. I approached and saw, as if graven in bas-relief upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic cat. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvellous. There was a rope about the animal's neck.

My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame. I took from my waistcoat pocket a pen-knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket!

When I first beheld this apparition — for I could scarcely regard it as less — my wonder and my terror were extreme. But at length reflection came to my aid. The cat, I remembered, had been hung in a garden adjacent to the house. Upon the alarm of fire, this garden had been immediately filled by the crowd — by someone of whom the animal must have been cut from the tree and thrown, through an open window, into my chamber. This had probably been done with the view of arousing me from sleep. The falling of other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly-spread plaster; the lime of which, with the flames and the ammonia from the carcass, had then accomplished the portraiture as I saw it.

Although I thus readily accounted to my reason, if not altogether to my conscience, for the startling fact just detailed, it did not the less fail to make a deep impression upon my fancy. For months I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat; and, during this period, there came back into my spirit a half-sentiment that seemed, but was not, remorse. I went so far as to regret the loss of the animal, and look about me, among the vile haunts which I now habitually frequented, for another pet of the same species, and of somewhat similar appearance, with which to supply its place.

One night as I sat, half-stupefied, in a den of more than infamy, my attention was



suddenly drawn to some black object, reposing upon the head of one of the immense hogsheads of gin, or of rum, which constituted the chief furniture of the apartment. I had been looking steadily at the top of this hogshead for some minutes, and what now caused me surprise was the fact that I had not sooner perceived the object thereupon. I approached it, and touched it with my hand. It was a black cat — a very large one — fully as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every respect but one. Pluto had not a white hair upon any portion of his body; but this cat had a large, although indefinite, splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast.

Upon my touching him, he immediately arose, purred loudly, rubbed against my hand, and appeared delighted with my notice. This, then, was the very creature of which I was in search. I at once offered to purchase it of the landlord; but this person made no claim to it — knew nothing of it — had never seen it before.

I continued my caresses, and when I prepared to go home, the animal evinced a disposition to accompany me. I permitted it to do so; occasionally stopping and patting it as I proceeded. When it reached the house it domesticated itself at once, and became immediately a great favourite with my wife.

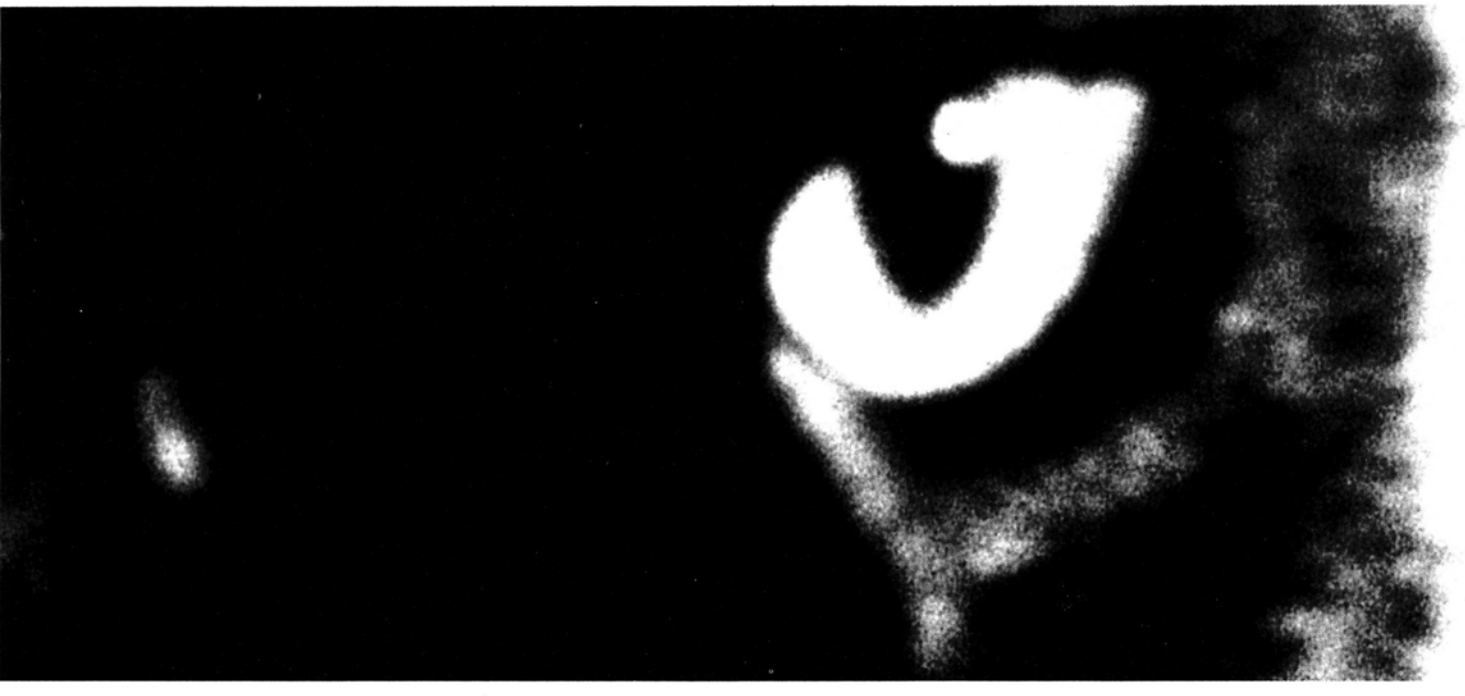
For my own part, I soon found a dislike to it arising within me. This was just the reverse of what I had anticipated; but — I know not how or why it was — its evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and annoyed me. By slow degrees, these feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred. I avoided the creature; a certain sense of shame, and the remembrance of my former deed of cruelty, preventing me from physically abusing it. I did not, for some weeks, strike, or otherwise violently ill-use it; but gradually — very gradually — I came to look upon it with unutterable loathing, and to flee silently from its odious presence, as from the breath of a pestilence.

What added, no doubt, to my hatred of the beast, was the discovery, on the morning after I brought it home, that, like Pluto, it also had been deprived of one of its eyes. This circumstance, however, only endeared it to my wife, who, as I have already said, possessed, in a high degree, that humanity of feeling which had once been my distinguishing trait, and the source of many of my simplest and purest pleasures.

With my aversion to this cat, however, its partiality for myself seemed to increase. It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the reader comprehend. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk, it would get between my feet, and thus nearly throw me down, or, fastening its long and sharp claws in my dress, clamber, in this manner, to my breast. At such times, although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing, partly by a memory of my former crime, but chiefly — let me confess it at once — by absolute dread of the beast.

This dread was not exactly a dread of physical evil — and yet I should be at a loss how otherwise to define it. I am almost ashamed to own — yes, even in this felon's cell, I am almost ashamed to own — that the terror and horror with which the animal inspired me, had been heightened by one of the merest chimeras it would be possible to conceive. My wife had called my attention, more than once, to the character of the

This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body. I knew that I could not remove it from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being observed my the neighbours.



mark of white hair, of which I have spoken, and which constituted the sole visible difference between the strange beast and the one I had destroyed. The reader will remember this mark, although large, had been originally very indefinite; but, by slow degrees — degrees nearly imperceptible, and which for a long time my reason struggled to reject as fanciful — it had, at length, assumed a rigorous distinctness of outline. It was now the representation of an object that I shudder to name — and for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster had I dared — it wa now, I say, the image of a hideous — of a ghastly thing — of the GALLOWS! — oh, mournful and terrible engine of horror and of crime — of agony and of death!

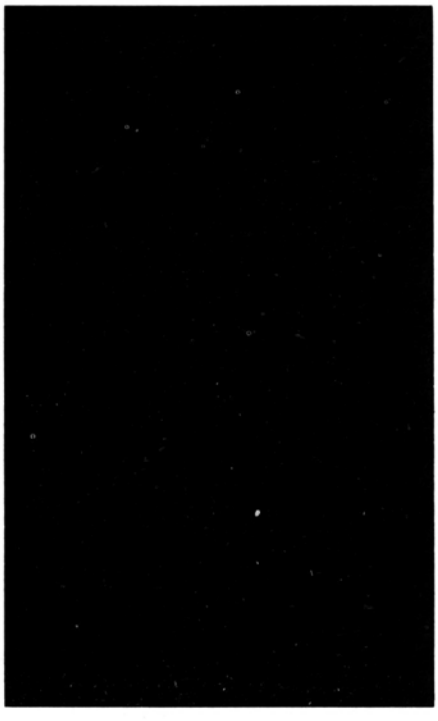
And now was I indeed wretched beyond the wretchedness of mere humanity. And a brute beast — whose fellow I had contemptuously destroyed — a brute beast to work out for me — for me, a man, fashioned in the image of the High God — so much of insufferable woe! Alas! neither by day nor by night knew I the blessing of rest any more! During the former the creature left me no moment alone; and, in the latter, I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight — an incarnate nightmare that I had no power to shake off — incumbent eternally upon my heart!

Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman.

Beneath the pressure of torments such as these, the feeble remnant of the good within me succumbed. Evil thoughts became my sole intimates — the darkest and most evil of thoughts. The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things and of all mankind; while, from the sudden, frequent, and ungovernable outbursts of a fury to which I now blindly abandoned myself, my uncomplaining wife, alas! was the most usual and the most patient of sufferers.

One day she accompanied me, upon some household errand, into the cellar of the old building which our poverty compelled us to inhabit. The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and, nearly throwing me headlong, exasperated me to madness. Uplifting an axe, and forgetting, in my wrath, the childish dread which had hitherto stayed my hand, I aimed a blow at the animal which, of course, would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife. Goaded, by the interference, into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp, and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot, without a groan.

This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body. I knew that I could not remove it from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being observed my the neighbours. Many projects entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting the corpse into minute fragments and destroying them by fire. At another, I resolved to dig a grave for it in the floor of the cellar. Again, I deliberated about casting it into the well in the yard — about packing it in a box, as if merchandise, with the usual arrangements, and so getting a porter to take it from the house. Finally I hit upon what I considered a far better expedient than either of these. I determined to wall it up in the cellar — as the monks of the Middle Ages are recorded to have walled up their victims.



For a purpose such as this the cellar was well adapted. Its walls were loosely constructed, and had lately been plastered throughout with a rough plaster, which the dampness of the atmosphere had prevented from hardening. Moreover, in one of the walls was a projection, caused by a false chimney, or fire-place, that had been filled up and made to resemble the rest of the cellar. I made no doubt that I could readily displace the bricks at this point, insert the corpse, and wall the whole up as before, so that no eye could detect anything suspicious.

And in this calculation I was not deceived. By means of a crowbar I easily dislodged the bricks, and, having carefully deposited the body against the inner wall, I propped it in that position, while, with little trouble, I relaid the whole structure as it originally stood. Having procured mortar, sand, and hair, with every possible precaution, I prepared a plaster which could not be distinguished from the old, and with this I very carefully went over the new brickwork. When I was finished, I felt satisfied that all was right. The wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed. The rubbish on the floor was picked up with the minutest care. I looked around triumphantly, and said to myself, "Here at least, then, my labour has not been in vain."

My next step was to look for the beast which had been the cause of so much wretchedness; for I had, at length, firmly resolved to put it to death. Had I been able to meet with it at the moment, there could have been no doubt of its fate; but it appeared that the crafty animal had been alarmed at the violence of my previous anger, and forbore to present itself in my present mood. It is impossible to describe, or to imagine, the deep, the blissful sense of relief which the absence of the detested creature occasioned in my bosom. It did not make its appearance during the night — and thus for one night at least, since its introduction into the house, I soundly and tranquilly slept; aye,

slept even with the burden of murder upon my soul!

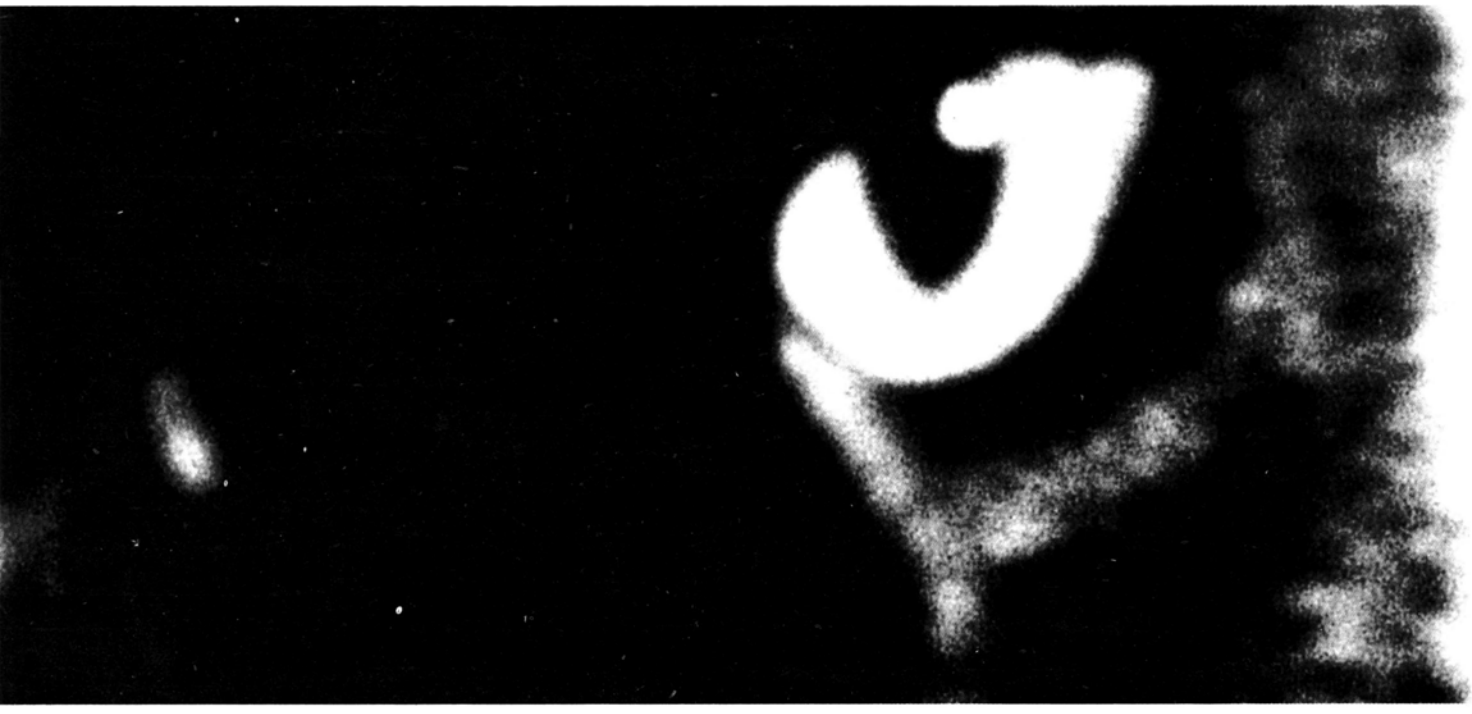
The second and the third day passed, and still my tormentor came not. Once again I breathed as a free man. The monster, in terror, had fled the premises for ever! I should behold it no more! My happiness was supreme! The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little. Some few inquiries had been made, but these had been readily answered. Even a search had been instituted — but of course nothing was to be discovered. I looked upon my future felicity as secured.

Upon the fourth day of the assassination, a party of the police came, very unexpectedly, into the house, and proceeded again to make rigorous investigation of the premises. Secure, however, in the inscrutability of my place of concealment, I felt no embarrassment whatever. The officers bade me accompany them in their search. They left no nook or corner unexplored. At length, for the third or fourth time, they decended into the cellar. I quivered not in a muscle. My heart beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence. I walked the cellar from end to end. I folded my arms upon my bosom, and roamed easily to and fro. The police were thoroughly satisfied, and prepared to depart. The glee at my heart was too strong to be restrained. I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph, and to render doubly sure their assurance of my guiltlessness.

"Gentlemen," I said at last, as the party ascended the steps, "I delight to have allayed your suspicions. I wish you all health, and a little more courtesy. By-the-bye, gentlemen, this — this is a very well-constructed house." (In the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all.) "I may say an excellent well-constructed house. These walls — are you going, gentlemen? — these walls are solidly put together"; and here, through the mere frenzy of bravado, I rapped heavily, with a cane which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brickwork behind which stood the corpse of the wife of my bosom.

But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Arch-Fiend! No sooner had the reverberation of my blows sunk into silence, than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb! — by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman — a howl — a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation.

Of my own thoughts it is folly to speak. Swooning, I staggered to the opposite wall. For one instant the party upon the stairs remained motionless, through extremity of terror and of awe. In the next, a dozen stout arms were toiling at the wall. It fell bodily. The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman. I had walled the monster up within the tomb!



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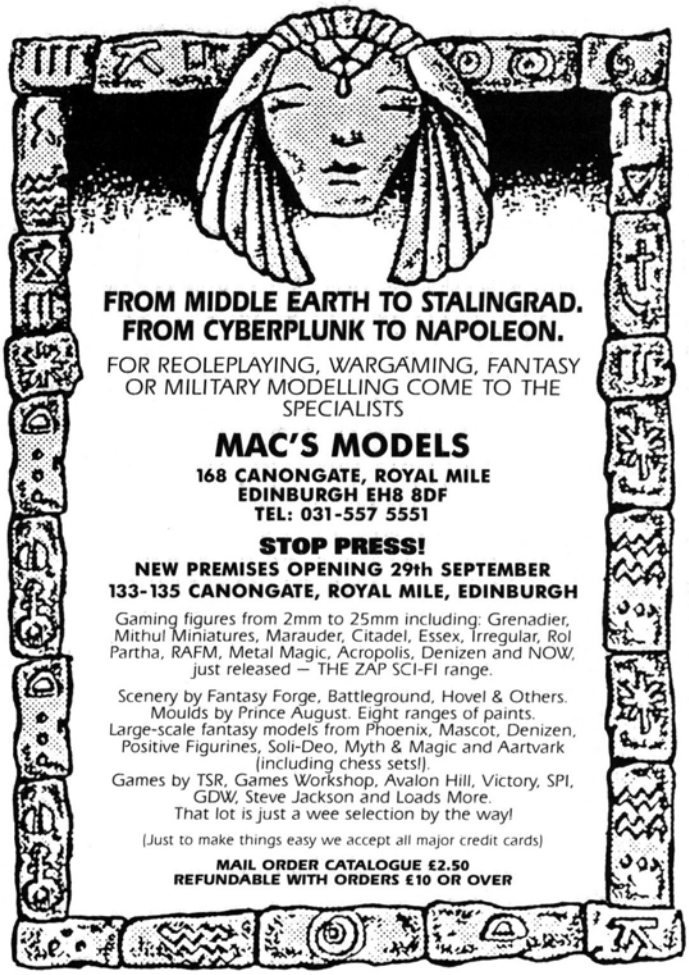

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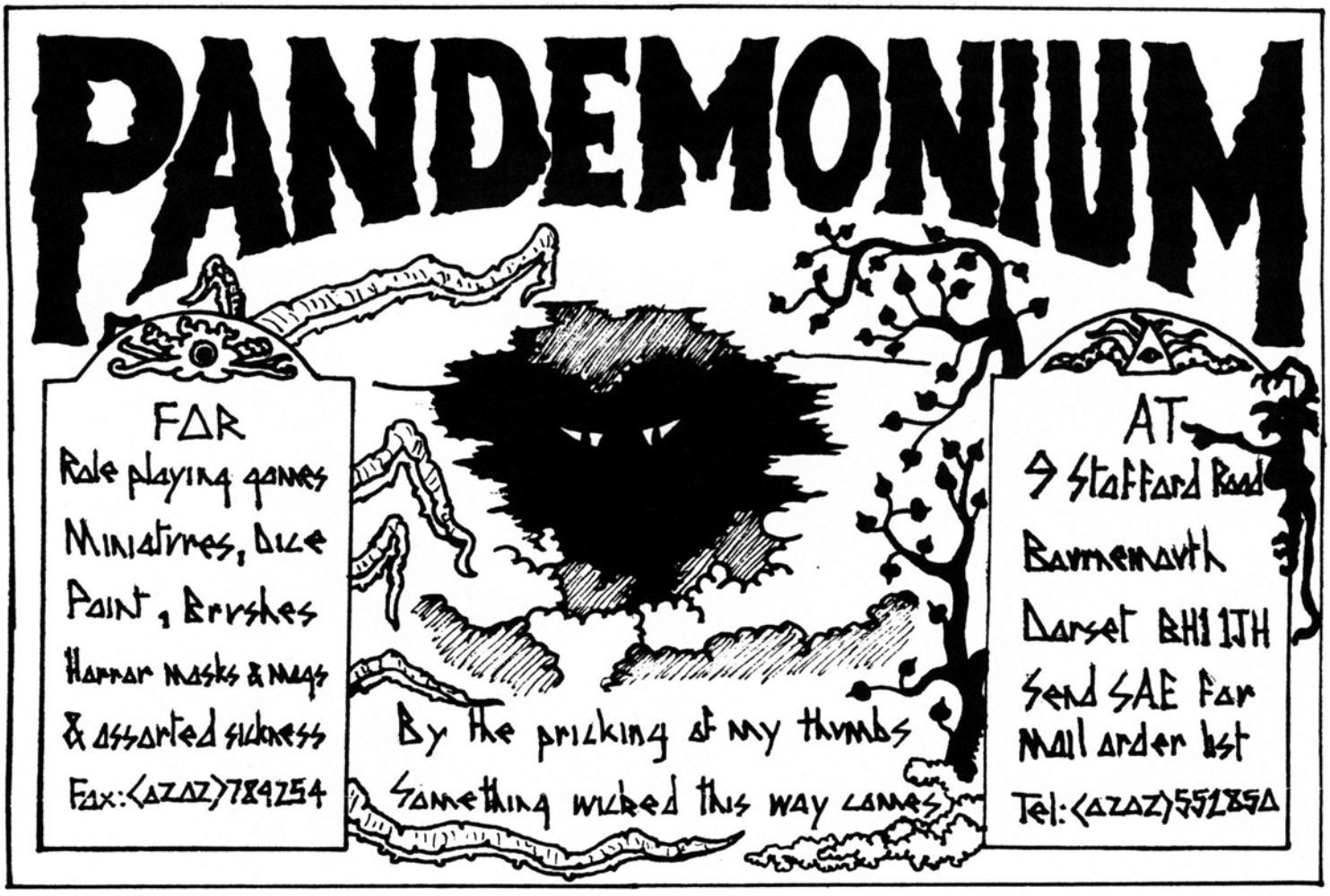
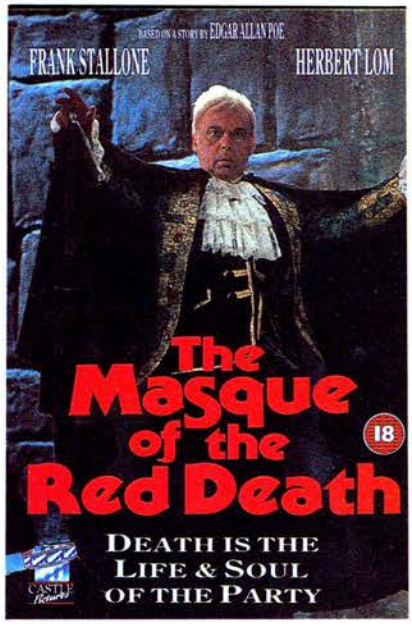


Film Crew


BASED ON A STORY BY EDGAR ALLAN POE
FRANK STALLONE
HERBERT LOM
The Masque of the Red Death
18
DEATH IS THE LIFE & SOUL OF THE PARTY
CASTLE Pictures

Astoundingly, all of this month's films are based on classic material. But how many, asks Dave Reeder, will be seen as classics themselves?

Suddenly, all we see in the cinema or on our video screens are remakes and reworkings of classic material — from the Towers/Birkinshaw rewritings of Poe via Corman and a vicious combination of TV Agatha Christie movies and TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED to the over-worked, completely hysterical RE-ANIMATOR 2, aka BRIDE OF RE-ANIMATOR.

But the real question, I guess, is why? Why now? Well, one simplistic reason might be that they're out of copyright now. Another, that any link to material that today's young cinema audience might have heard of is to be cultivated — and, to slip for a moment into a brief aside, isn't it ironic that the originally satirically titled TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA/HERO TURTLES should now be seen as cultural icons and examples of marketing genius?

However, movie time. Seeing this is the special Poe issue of SKELETON CREW perhaps we should start with the eagerly awaited TWO EVIL EYES, the Poe-based collaboration between horror giants George Romero and Dario Argento. Amazingly, perhaps, their first full collaboration (and Argento's US directional debut) is deeply depressing — Romero's THE FACTS IN THE CASE OF M. VALDEMAR is the most static, unimaginative work by a major director that I can recall seeing. It's almost as if he's forgotten what film is all about and the combination of story (hypnotised man is kept alive after his murder by wife and lover) and acting (Adrienne Barbeau's almost constantly quivering nostrils) is enough to sink this one deep into your subconscious.

In fact, it runs as nothing more than a poor episode piece from a network generated US TV playlet — a poor fate for both director and ultimate guiding light, Poe. There are shocks, of course, and a moment or two of frisson, but all too often we're reduced to spotting little hommages to earlier work — the opening panning shot in a graveyard, for instance, just cries out 'notice me! notice me!'. The problem is, we do to the detriment of the film.

At least Argento's contribution, THE BLACK CAT, takes hommage to an extreme. Every character is named after a Poe character and there are constant references to other Poe stories — a pendulum killing, a madman collecting his cousin's teeth from her grave (shades of BERENICE with a neat moment of manic acting from SPFX genius Tom Savini) and so on and so on. The story is perhaps too well known to bear much repeating — man tries to kill cat, succeeds in killing girlfriend, mistakenly walls cat up with dead body in his flat, police find him out — but Argento performs neat twists and turns, making the central character (a fine performance by Keitel) into a voyeuristic S&M dabbler whose fall into the depths of his character is matched by our increasingly unsettled identification with him.

Yet in the end, we're reduced to spotting the references to the genre — an overhead, top of the stairs shot of Martin Balsam providing the neatest Hitchcock (or PSYCHO) reference I've seen for some time. And that isn't too bad. At least there are flashes of the old Argento amidst the generally poor material. Perhaps, given the fact that the film was in planning for an age, both Romero and Argento just got too close to the material — it certainly needs a stronger hand than both of them appear capable of at present.

Argento believes that 'when I began to make films, I recognised that my themes had some affinity with the events told by Poe in his stories: his hallucinatory worlds, his bloody visions'. For my part, I'm still waiting for his first proper Poe movie.

A stylish moment from THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH.

Argento's stylish use of colour is very evident in TWO EVIL EYES.

Which brings us neatly to the Towers/Birkinshaw double helping of Poe — THE HOUSE OF USHER and THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH. Both update Poe with a singular lack of success and both manage to stray so far from the originals (or even the Roger Corman adaptions which by now seem like texts) to make one wonder why the Poe connection was sought in the first place.

Of the two, MASQUE is the stronger film, helped by an excellent central performance by Michelle Hoey as a freelance photographer determined to get some photos of a TV soap star at a party held in a Bavarian castle by Ludwig — Herbert Lorn caught in some dreadful limbo between overacting and just trying to remember what acting consists of. A bit of gratuitous gore — one excellent scene has a fashion designer incorporated into cloth on a giant loom, needles and wool piercing her flesh as she hangs from the frame — and a bit too much running yet again down the same corridor means that the film fails to build on character, but it's an entertaining hour and a half, oddly reminiscent of PHANTOM OF THE PARADISE, even given the stunningly poor Frank Stallone.

However, the strange thought remains all the time you watch this — if they wanted to create another psycho-slasher movie, why complicate matters by importing Poe? You go figure it, I'm still trying to figure out the scene in USHER where Oliver Reed (playing, as some unkind souls have pointed out, The House of Usher rather than any particular member of the family) rapes the heroine in a shower she's taking, fully clothed. Weird or what?

This one is like nothing more than an Amicus shocker, based on a Poe via Chetwynd-Hayes, with a bit of Ken Russell thrown in to make the set more vibrant. American tourists come to visit the family home, car crash finishes off (or does it?) the hunky hero, leaving the plucky heroine to race around the house fending off the amorous advances of Reed (as the last of the Ushers) and the deadly advances of Pleasence (as the penultimate Usher, armed with a drill attached to his arm). In fact, it's only Pleasence's performance that makes the film watchable, though any connection with a Poe character is purely coincidental.

The verdict? An undemanding bit of viewing, provided you forget the source material!

No, not a scene from DEEP THROAT — this is the Bride of the Re-animator!

And that's a verdict especially true of the sequel RE-ANIMATOR 2, the ferociously bad taste follow-up to RE-ANIMATOR (no!), based at some indefinable stage in its past on a story for the amateur press by one HP Lovecraft. Where Lovecraft was all plot and style, this is pure gibberish and hysteria — it's like a giant pot into which thrill and treat after thrill and treat are stirred with no thought for the final mix. Amazingly, it works — the plot stumbles towards the rebuilding of a woman from diverse parts by the obsessed Herbert West, whose serum re-animates anything it touches.

The film starts at full volume and total mania — and then moves into higher gear. Mutants, flying winged heads, hearts ripped from bodies that can't cope with sexual rejection, etc etc — how can you resist it?

Intriguingly, it sets itself up for yet another sequel, amid the

final gore gross-out, which is okay by me. At least it's imaginative. And, yes, for completists — the film is clearly meant to be called BRIDE OF RE-ANIMATOR and there is a great 'thank you' credit to Mary Shelly, presumably no relation to the Mary 'Frankenstein' Shelley we all know and love.

Which touch of history brings us neatly to our final entry for this issue — one more remake of the classic Gaston Leroux novel, THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA.

Hard to believe, this one actually comes up with a twist to the story — music student resurrects the monster's memory by singing his long-forgotten music and then slips back 120 years into a waking dream. Resonances of Freddy abound, but then I guess if our money was bankrolling the film we'd want to cover all the commercial bases too. The scenes in the theatre are subtly done and the never intrusive shocker sections (Englund sewing skin onto his decaying face, like some kind of LEATHERFACE understudy) position the film at some half way point between the recent, completely up to date PHANTOM OF THE MALL and the soon to be expected Lloyd Webber celluloid PHANTOM.

If you can take seeing this story yet again, then this is worth catching to see that Englund is capable of more than his usual slasher tricks and that the fantasy subgenere last exploited by SOMEWHERE IN TIME is not yet dead. Thank goodness.

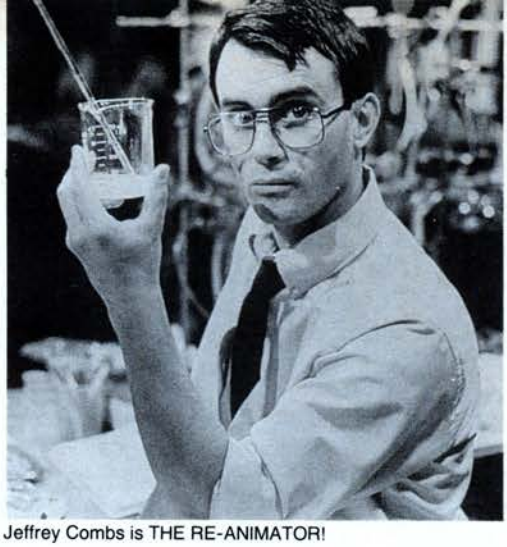
Meanwhile, perhaps we can just put in a small plea to film makers to leave the classics alone unless they can make a significant contribution to what already exists. Some chance there, I think even the Englund PHANTOM is to be followed by a sequel.

THE HOUSE OF USHER
Castle Video — 18 — 1989 — 87 minutes
Walter Usher: Donald Pleasence
Roderick Usher: Oliver Reed
Molly McNulty: Romy Windsor
Ryan Usher: Rufus Sward
Mr Derrick: Norman Coombes
Mrs Derrick: Anne Stradi
Gwen: Carole Farquhar
Screenplay, based on the novel by Edgar Allan Poe, by Michael J Murray
Producer: Harry Alan Towers
Director: Alan Birkinshaw

THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH
Castle Video — 18 — 1989 — 89 minutes
Ludwig: Herbert Lom
Duke: Frank Stallone
Elaina: Brenda Vaccaro
Rebecca: Michelle Hoey
Colette: Christine Lunde
Dr Karen: Christobel d'Ortez
Max: Simon Poland
Screenplay, based on the story by Edgar Allan Poe, by Michael J Murray
Producer: Harry Alan Towers
Director: Alan Birkinshaw

TWO EVIL EYES
Medusa
(The Facts In The Case Of M. Valdemar/The Black Cat)
Jessica Valdemar: Adrienne Barbeau
Dr Robert Hoffman: Ramy Zada
Steve Pike: EG Marshall
Ernest Valdemar: Bingo O'Malley
Rod Usher: Harvey Keitel
Annabel: Madeleine Potter
Legrand: John Amos
Mr Pym: Martin Balsam
Mrs Pym: Kim Hunter
Producer (Valdemar): Achille Manzotti
Director (Valdemar): George Romero
Producer & Director (Cat): Dario Argento

In Romero's section of TWO EVIL EYES, the living dead take on unlikely new forms.



Jeffrey Combs is THE RE-ANIMATOR!

RE-ANIMATOR 2
(Bride of Re-Animator)
Medusa — 18 — 1990 — 93 minutes
Herbert West: Jeffrey Combs
Dan Can: Bruce Abbott
Lt Leslie Chapman: Claude Earl Jones
Francesca: Fabiana Udenio
Dr Carl Hill: David Gale
Screenplay: Woody Keith & Rick Fry
Produced & Directed: Brian Yuzna

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA
Castle — 18 — 1989 — 87 minutes
Christine Day: Jill Schoelen
Erik Destler: Robert Englund
Screenplay, based on the novel by Gaston Leroux, by Duke Sandefur
Produced by Harry Alan Towers
Directed by Dwight H Little

Donald Pleasence up to no good in THE HOUSE OF USHER.

COMPETITION!!!

Fabulous PHANTOM OF THE OPERA competition time . . .

Yes, here's your chance to join the horror set. After reading our editor's thoughts on THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA, here's a shot at some neat stuff. It seems that those kind folk at Castle just can't move for the piles of goodies filling up the office, so they've kindly donated them to SKELETON CREW readers.

And all you have to do is answer the following three questions — on a postcard by October 10th:

The PHANTOM explains to his chosen love the possible life together that could be theirs.

1. ***Name at least one other actor who has played the mysterious Phantom on film.***
2. ***Name any other horror film set in a theatre.***
3. ***Has Robert England appeared in any other horror films? If, so what character did he play?***

Not too hard for you, we hope. The lucky winners — first out of the hat — will win:

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And remember — naked bribery, imaginatively expansive answers and entries in on time (before October 10th) all stand better chances of winning some fabulous THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA stuff. Go for it!

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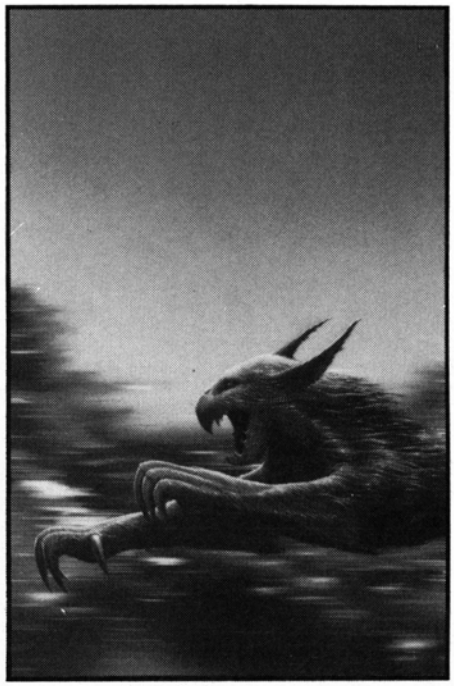

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GREEN FOR DANGER
Nick Gillott

Nick Gillott is a misunderstood roleplaying and comics afficionado. This issue, *Dicing With Death* provides a troubling look at the environmental decay of South America.

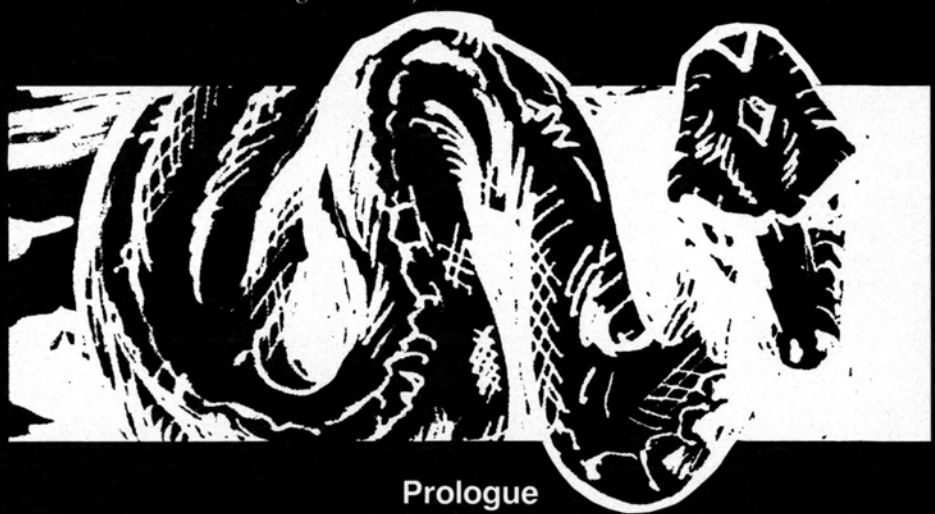
Keeper's Information

The Venezuelan military has commenced the construction of a chemical plant on a plateau in the middle of the rain forest, unaware that the previous owners of the plateau, All-World Chemical Industries, had illegally dumped toxic waste in an old disused gold mine at the base of the plateau. During blasting, the construction workers accidentally diverted the flow of a river, sending it down through the mine. As the barrels of waste were washed downstream towards the Orinoco and, ultimately, the Atlantic Ocean, they became breached, and their chemical contents have caused an ecological catastrophe to occur.

Furthermore, about three miles off the Orinoco delta is an ancient colony. They have become aware of the pollution seeping towards their habitat, and plan to put a stop to it. They have many human hybrids in major towns in the area, looking for the cause of the danger . . .

To further complicate matters, the Columbian government has heard rumours that the chemical plant will be used to manufacture nerve gas, and has sent a spy to find out what is going on.

Finally, a wealthy American in New York, whose son becomes gravely and mysteriously ill while conducting a survey on the effects of 'slash and burn' on the surrounding fauna, contacts and hires the player characters to find out who is to blame so that he can bring them to justice.



Prologue

The players are called into the office of Dan Laufenburg, Attorney-at-Law. One of his clients, Aaron Rubinstein, wants some able minds and bodies to help him find out what has happened to Art Rubinstein, his son. They will be paid handsomely with expenses. Art, they are told, was concerned about the effect of 'slash and burn' on the world's climate and had gone to Venezuela to study its more local effects. Last week he was taken ill, however, and is currently in a coma in a top New York hospital . . .

Assuming they accept, they will be flown to Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. From there they will catch a boat to the Orinoco delta and upriver to Ciudad Guayana, where Art was based.

A *Call of Cthulhu* scenario for 4-6 modern investigators.

Part One : First Impressions

On the river journey the players will see evidence of pollution: dead fish floating in the river; wilting shrubs on the banks; animals staggering about, obviously in distress. Finally they reach Cuidad Guayana. They settle into their hotel and try to find out more about the area. There are many potential pollutants. The local farmers, in trying to overcome deficiencies in the soil, over-use fertilisers and there many opencast iron mines (the area is one of the world's largest iron producers). They will encounter hostility as they make their enquiries — interfering Yanquis, why don't they mind their own business? Do you know the problems of farming in this soil? Why don't you wipe the debts our country owes so we can afford to grow food? etc. etc. On their travels they will notice that many people are suffering from starvation or malnutition, although they will note that the farms are growing cotton and tobacco — the cash crops. There is also a thriving drug culture here, due to the close proximity of the rain forest.

While in the town, the players will hear some of the more superstitious Catholics talking about Judgement Day and the end of the world, as strange creatures have apparently been washed up in the delta. They will also hear that there are some other Americans in town asking the same questions; a group of two men and a woman, representing the Greenpeace environmentalist group. There is a fair amount of activity in the air, too, with army helicopters flying in and out twice a day. A Spot Widden roll followed by a Chemistry roll will reveal that the choppers are carrying equipment for a chemical plant . . . The players will also become aware of another helicopter in the area, run by an American named Bob Waterfield.

It will slowly become apparent that, while there are many sources of pollution apparent (even down to rusting cans in the river), this town isn't responsible. The pollution seems to be coming from further upriver. At short notice, they will only be able to find a small boat for hire; its pilot, Sanchez, will take them upriver for a few dollars, though his boat looks in desparate need of repair. After about nine miles they will arrive at a junction between the Orinoco and the Caroni. If the party continues up the Orinoco, they will see that the effects of the pollution die away after a mile or so. However, travelling up the Caroni the pollution is as rife as ever. By now it is late in the afternoon and fuel is running low; the pilot, Sanchez, will continue if requested, but his fee trebles. The party might be able to find a village upriver, but the inhabitants are likely to be xenophobic towards anybody from more than a couple of miles away, especially since the only foreigners they've seen recently have been the military flying over and scaring their prey away. They also blame the farmers for scaring away the animals available for hunting through 'slash and burn'. The players will be threatened by the natives with arrows and blowpipes. A Spot Hidden will reveal a sticky substance on the tips of the arrows — poison (Potency 13). If the players are sensible, they will totally agree that discretion is the better part of valour — and run away! If they decide to fight it out, I suggest you find them a good psychologist, but if somehow they survive the battle they must travel further on foot, Sanchez having used his feet (and a modicum of intelligence) to escape. After many days of marching with the village people on their trail, they will hear something large stomping through the jungle after them. Cut to a ground-based encounter with the Dark Young of Shub-Niggurath . . . If they do the sensible thing and escape by boat, their fuel reserves will soon dwindle; they can turn back, but they will have to coast the last few miles on the river's current.

On the return journey, as the light dims, they will see a gorgeous sunset in the evening sky. An Idea roll will tell them it is in the wrong direction for the setting sun. A Listen roll will reveal to them the tormented howl of the fauna in the distance, running away from the distant fire (0/1d4 SAN loss). Occasionally the explosion of the sap in a tree can be heard. Anybody who makes another Listen roll will hear an unearthy scream in the distance (0/1d4 SAN loss). A half Know roll will suggest that this is just the combined roar of thousands of distressed animals playing tricks on the ear; a Zoology roll will, however, disprove this, causing a further SAN loss of 0/1d4 points.

An Idea roll will eventually point the source of pollution towards the place the helicopters are frequenting.

Part Two : The Thing in the Forest

By now the party should be extremely glad to see the lights of the town — they could probably use a drink, and it is in the bar that a Listen roll will allow them to overhear some soldiers on leave mention a plateau. Either in the bar or, if they don't drink there, the next day, they will be approached by Bob Waterfield, who has heard they are looking for transport upriver; for a 'nominal' charge he could take them in his Huey helicopter, fully airworthy and in which he will fly them anywhere they wish to go. If asked, he knows the plateau they were talking about — Plateau Boliver ("Ev'rything in this area seems to be called Bolivar! Shit!"). He mentions in passing that some environmentalist oddballs had also hired his services. "What's going on? Some kind of weirdos conduction in the forest? Still, doesn't bother me what shit you guys are up to, long as I git paid." He also states that they will have to fly at night to avoid the Venezuelan army choppers. Meet him at about six, he says. "Shit, it'll be just like 'Nam!" . . .

This will give the players a chance to check up on Plateau Bolivar. It is about fifty miles away, two miles by one-and-a-half, and rises about two thousand feet above the rain forest. Although the top has never been explored, gold mines were dug at its foot, though these were shut down forty years ago when the vein run out. If they bother to check further they will see that many disappearances are reported over the years. It is also rumoured that a fierce tribe live at the top of a plateau, but this has never been proved. The mines were brought ten years ago by All World Chemical Industries, but were never actually reopened, and were eventually sold to the Venezuelan government six months ago. Further research indicates that the local Indians are extremely scared of the plateau, and won't go near it, even in this day and age.

(If the party are worried about their funds, they can always check with Laufenburg, who will okay further expenditure.)

When they arrive the next day they will be greeted by Bob and his assistant, Felippe (Columbian spy!). They will notice several bullet-holes in the Huey — the result of a disagreement with the Venezuelan authorities, Bob also introduces them to 'Ronnie', an Indian (Deep One Hybird!) from the Orinoco river, who is his 'gofer' — "I named him after the President — got a hell of a name I can't say!". Felippe missed his opportunity to find out about the chemical plant when flying the environmentalists in, so is interested in helping the players.

As soon as dusk arrives they take off and head for the Plateau Bolivar. The fire seen the night before is still raging, and Bob will inform them that he has heard on the radio that it is out of control: "It seems that one of the less intelligent farmers decided to help it by using some petrol and used to much, shit-for-brains!" Their flight path will take them very close to the fire, and a Spot Hidden roll will reveal the animals fleeing the area. The sound of the animals can be heard above the noise of the 'copter. Suddenly the helicopter is hit by something (DEXx5 to avoid being flung around for a point of damage). "Prob'ly a bird, must be thousands of the sods flying around. If I wreck Lucille here, I'll get that farmer . . . !"

Anybody looking out of the window will see a branch reaching out towards them (0/1d4 SAN loss). CRASH!! Something hits the 'copter again (DEX rolls as before). Anybody still looking out will see the 'branch' wrap itself around the tail boom. DEXx2 rolls are required as forward motion is stopped (damage 3 points for any failures). Just as they regain their composure, the 'copter lurches forward (DEXx3 or 1 point of damage) and there is a deafening, unearthy scream (reducing all Listen rolls by 20% for now). Anybody looking out at this point will see a tentacle withdraw from the boom — it has been severed by the tail rotor. The nightmarish shape of a Dark Young of Shub-Niggurath (see *CoC* rulebook) can be made out . . . The tail rotor is now inoperable: the 'copter begins to career wildly around (DEXx4 or take 1 point of damage: CONx5 to avoid throwing up).

A Spot Hidden roll reveals a small clearing which might be wide enough to land the

helicopter; as Bob lands, the 'copter gives a final lurch and crashes into the tree-line (DEXx4 or take 2 points of damage). Anybody checking on Bob will find him dead — a branch has crashed through the cockpit window and his head (SAN loss 1/1d6) . . . Sense will tell the players to get away from the 'copter as fast as possible; within one minute the 'copter will blow up, killing anybody still inside, and inflicting 1d6 points of damage to anyone still within 100' radius. A Listen roll (reduced by 10% due to the explosion) will reveal that something large is heading their way — the Dark Young! Again, the sensible thing is to run, but where? They are more than forty miles away from the town; there are no known villages in the area; the only nearby civilisation is the army on top of the plateau, but even if they reach the foot of it, how do they climb the two thousand feet to the top? 'Ronnie' rules out the possibility of heading for the town, reminding the players that the fire is between the town and the party, but says he will guide them to the top of the plateau (he knows of a secret way up). The Dark Young is by now very close, and the players should hesitate no longer in escaping.

If they manage to get away and rest the next day, allow them each two Idea rolls: the first will make them think 'How does a native from the Delta know a way to the top of an obscure plateau two hundred miles away? Come to think of it, he didn't seem that scared last night when that monstrosity came after us . . .' The second roll will suggest that the helicopter blew up a little two violently . . .

Part Three : The Plateau

After two days' of hacking through the jungle they will hear the sound of running water — the river! However, an Idea roll will reveal that, according to their map, the river should round the other side of the plateau. Approaching closer, they will see that the flora and fauna of this area is dead, a hundred feet either side of the water. The river itself is just flowing through the trees as though it didn't belong there. On a Spot Hidden roll one of the party will see a yellow barrel wedged between some trees. It seems to be leaking a blue fluid. The name ALL-WORLD CHEMICALS is stencilled on the barrel.

Ronnie leads them toward the far side of the plateau, where they will come across a dried-up river bed (the river's previous path). A Geology or halved Idea roll will enable the players to work out that this riverbed has only been dry a few months, as pools of stagnant water will still remain. They are lead to a small cave just beyond the riverbed; it soon becomes a tunnel which winds upwards, revealing hideous carvings on the walls (0/1d3 SAN loss) depicting scenes of strange and grotesque creatures (the players will recognise the Dark Young and (given an Idea roll) a creature matching the thing washed up a few days ago in the Delta). The passage widens out to become a temple of sorts; the carvings here are even more horrific, and at the far end stands a statue realistically depicting Shub-Niggurath (1d4/1d10 SAN loss for the combined effect of the statue and the carvings). In front of the statue is an altar bearing the remains of a female sacrifice (1/1d6 SAN loss). Her body has been slit open, the innards draped decoratively around the altar. The players will see that this is the female Greenpeace member. At this point Ronnie pulls a gun on them and herds them towards the statue. As they get closer they will see behind it a cage holding two bedraggled looking men — the remaining Greenpeace members; they are suspended in the cage over a gorge within which runs a deep river. If they try to make a fight of it, Felippe will make a break for the surface (there being only two exits). If they don't, Ronnie places them in the cage and returns later with an Indian — the High Priest of the Sky People of Shub-Niggurath. Ronnie explains that they will be sacrificed to his god that very night . . .

Two hours later (after managing to place some explosives in the plant) Felippe returns and releases the party. If asked where he has been, he will state that he went to warn the army; a Psychology roll will reveal the lie. If they manage to force the truth out of him (by threatening to lock him in the cage to be sacrificed, for instance) he tells them of his mission, and the detonation is in thirty minutes. An Idea roll will inform them that if the explosion occurs, a cloud of poisonous gas will drift over the area killing thousands of people and animals (Felippe is a bit dumb, you see). He tells them where he placed the bomb but will not go back voluntarily as he doesn't want to risk being shot as a spy.

Once top-side they will see the plant in the distance. It is fairly easy to sneak up on as they are not expecting visitors: the sentries are all asleep as the players can gain access providing they make Sneak rolls. It will take about fifteen minutes to find the device (use your sense of the dramatic, especially if they woke the sentries!), but disarming it will only require an Electrical Repair roll as Felippe had to improvise. This will be very close to the detonation time, so tell the players! Make them sweat by having a guard wander round etc.

Once the bomb is disarmed they can make their way outside again, but this time they will be captured, taken to Captain Rodriguez and then back to the cage. However this time a Spot Hidden roll will point out an area of the cage floor which is weak; everybody stamping on it for about a minute will make a hole (DEXx5 to avoid falling through into the river below). However,all the stamping has alerted the High Priest and his men, who come rushing into the temple armed with guns and bows. The party can try to swing out of the bottom onto the temple floor (DEXx2 of half Jump roll), any failure sending the character into the river. If they do fall (or deliberately jump) into the river they will, on a successful Jump roll, take 1d3 points of damage (failure means 1d8 damage).

While underwater anyone succeeding a Luck roll will notice daylight coming from another surface; if they go towards this light their heads will emerge in fresh air, in the middle of a forest lake. The trees are huge, reaching hundreds of feet into the air. If they physically leave the lake, they will find themselves in the Dreamlands and out of this adventure (at least). If they don't, they can go back under and resurface in the gorge.

The flow takes them downriver through the gold mine and finally out to the area where they saw the barrel. Once through the mine a CONx5 roll is required to avoid swallowing water (those that do must resist POT 15 or fall ill like Art. A full recovery, given full medical care within three days, will be made in two months).

If they choose to fight their way out, they can make their way to the exit, but will still be pursued through the forest by the angry tribe. They also have the problem of finding their way back to civilisation through fifty miles of rainforest, with hostile tribesmen and a wounded Dark Young out there somewhere (I leave that part in your capable hands due to lack of space) . . .

Once back in civilisation, All-World Chemicals will be taken to court, and the military will be forced to shut down the plant due to pressure from an overseas bank (misuse of loans).

Cast of Characters

Bob Waterfield, Huey pilot, Ex-Vietnam pilot, here because he hated the city after the war. Will do anything for money. Always wears shades, an old Jimi Hendrix or Grateful Dead t-shirt, combat trousers and a battered leather jacket.

Felippe Gonzalez, spy. Short man of about 25, not too bright but mentally sound.

'Ronnie', gofer. A Deep One hybrid still in the early stages of The Change — his bulbous eyes etc. aren't too noticeable. Has been told to find the source of the pollution and report back.

Captain Rodriguez, plant commander. Has fallen under the High Priest's spell, turning his prisoners over to them.

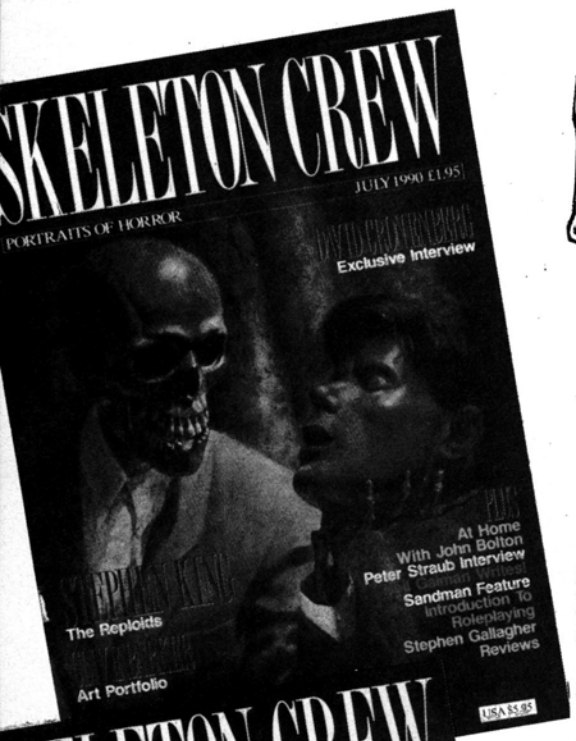
High Priest. Will help the Deep Ones in their mission. As powerful as necessary for your campaign.

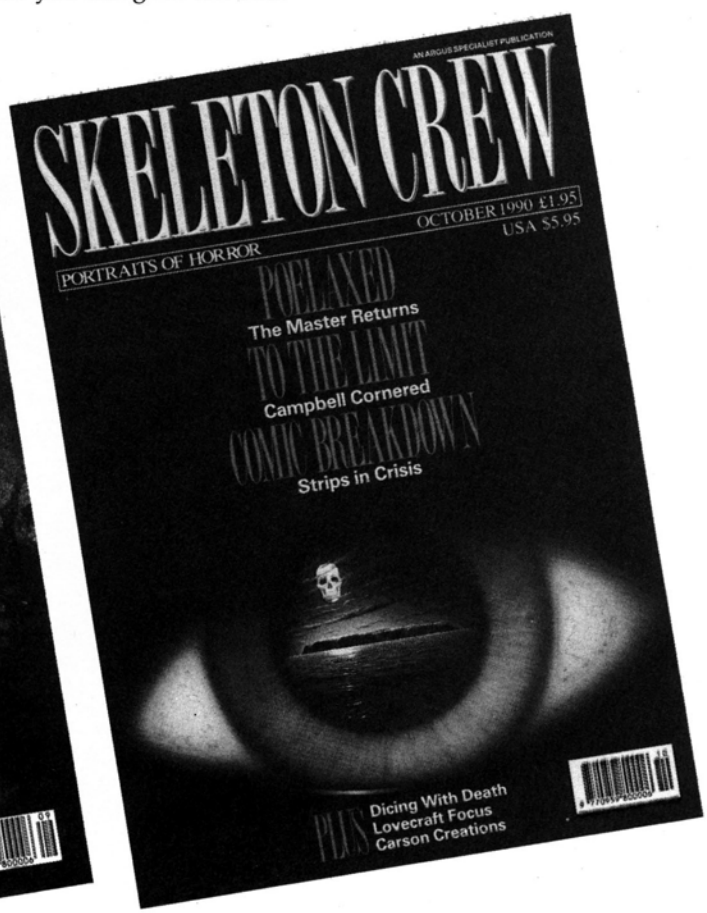
South American Indian. Extremely xenophobic due to maltreatment by army and farmers.

Venezuelan Army, Bored, poorly-trained conscripts.

Local farmers. Dislike foreigners asking them to stop burning the forest (they have to afford the bank loan repayments).

Last Writes





Okay, you've had four issues of SKELETON CREW to enjoy and now it's your turn to do some work. If only to avoid the bitter truth of the William Blake thought: 'You never know what is enough until you have had more than enough'.

Incidentally, if you've a moment or two to spend down some of the genre's more intriguing byways, just look at Blake's poetry and artwork. There's bizarre. There's also the roots of Clive Barker and, oh, so many others.

But leaving William Blake aside for just the moment, let's think about this magazine. After all, we've now done four issues. Time enough you'd think for a momentary halt in our desperate search for the new and intriguing. Time enough for some feedback.

I mean, we've had two editors already . . . and we're still waiting for your thoughts on this wonderful creation — the horror magazine.

For instance, have we too much fiction? Not enough? Too many explanatory pieces? Not enough? Too much on films? Not enough? And all like that.

That's important to us to know because it would be all too easy to fill this magazine with the things that excite the editor and his friends. All too easy to get parochial and print features by friends and acquaintances. All too easy to go wrong.

So, there are two alternatives. You could just sit and wait and see what happens. That would be boring, perhaps. Or you could throw your stake into the pot and take a chance and ensure your words help to mould its feature.

Okay, then. Let's here from you. What do you want to read? What sort of feature would you like? What direction could we take? I mean, as a simplistic case, would you rather read about Poe's influence on the horror writers of the 20th century or details about the latest slice of the censor's scalpel. In exquisite detail, of course.

Our money goes on the intelligent, realistic vision of the best possible amalgam of old and new. See you along for the ride?

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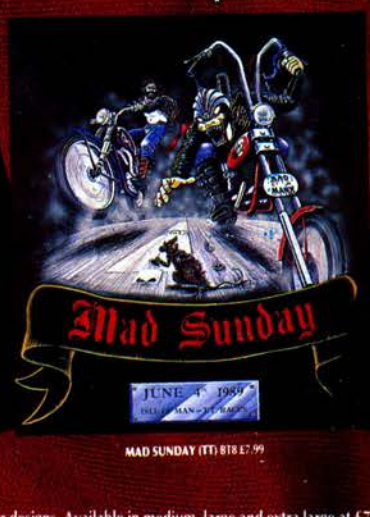

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